

Will You?

A Lenten Study
of Baptismal Promises

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in collaboration with
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The Baptismal Covenant

The Book of Common Prayer, pp. 304-305

- Celebrant:* Do you believe in God the Father?
- People:* I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.
- Celebrant:* Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God?
- People:* I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.
- Celebrant:* Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit?
- People:* I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

Celebrant: Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers?

People: I will, with God's help.

Celebrant: Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

People: I will, with God's help.

Celebrant: Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

People: I will, with God's help.

Celebrant: Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

People: I will, with God's help.

Celebrant: Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

People: I will, with God's help.

Introduction

Holy Baptism is one of the two great sacraments of the gospel given by Christ to his church. Jesus himself was baptized by John at the beginning of his public ministry. The Catechism states that in baptism we are joined with Christ in his death and resurrection, born into God's family, the church, forgiven of our sins, and raised to new life in the Spirit. As part of the service, all who are present renew their own Baptismal Covenant as the newly baptized person is making these promises publicly for the first time. In the case of an infant baptism, sponsors and parents answer on the child's behalf and promise to help the newly baptized live into these promises as they mature. The first three questions of our Baptismal Covenant are about belief, a restatement of our creeds. The last five questions, the "will you" questions, are about action, and these action questions are the focus of this Lenten study. Throughout the season of Lent, we will take a deep look at the promises we make in our baptism using evangelism as our lens.

"Evangelism" is uncomfortable for many Episcopalians, and we'll address the stigma associated both with the word itself and the actions, as well as explore new ways of thinking about evangelism. The "will you" questions of our Baptismal Covenant detail how we are to function within our faith communities and in the wider world as a

result of the belief we profess. These “will you” questions follow an arc from a “gathering in” to a “sending out,” and this is the arc we will travel together through Lent. These questions are a natural framework for redefining evangelism and laying out a path for living into the promises we make when we answer these questions, “I will, with God’s help.”

This initiative began as a school project in seminary for a class called “Reimagining Congregations in Mission.” The assignment was to design a curriculum outline for a Christian education class specific to my congregational context at the time. After seminary, I received a grant from the Episcopal Evangelism Society to expand on my seminary project and create a five-week daily Lenten curriculum. As the program developed, Forward Movement became a partner as well. This curriculum has been through two piloting phases, and feedback from both phases has been incorporated into the final book and study.

This book has five chapters, each focusing on one of the “will you” questions, and each chapter is divided into seven brief reflections, perfect for daily engagement. These reflections include personal stories, history, theology, and material from common church resources such as scripture, hymns, and liturgy. The closing reflection each week is a brief prayer. If you are participating in this curriculum as part of a small group, this prayer is repeated in the group leader guide as the

opening prayer for the group meeting, which ideally would fall on the seventh day of the week's readings. If you are reading this as an individual Lenten discipline, the seventh reflection each week would be best read on Sundays as a part of your worship that day.

Each chapter highlights ministries across the wider church that illustrate the relationship between evangelism and that week's baptismal promise. I have also provided resources and references in an appendix for further exploration. I have intentionally written in a first-person conversational style in part because evangelism is invitational and personal. It is about sharing stories and sharing ourselves and our faith with others. In these reflections, I share my thoughts and theology, shaped by my years in seminary, my work as a hospital chaplain, my vocation as an Episcopal priest, and most importantly, my call as a follower of Christ. These reflections are an opening of the discussion, not an ending to it. Their purpose is to prompt you to reflect on your own experiences and beliefs, and I hope they will prepare you to reframe your understanding of evangelism, either through individual reflection or as part of a lively and fruitful weekly group meeting.

My prayer is that this book will inspire you to think in new ways about the promises we make to God, to each other, and to ourselves in our baptisms.

Thank you for reading and joining in the conversation.

Week One

Will you
continue in
the apostles'
teaching and
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Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers?

DAY ONE

It may seem counterintuitive to begin a conversation about evangelism with this week's promise. After all, we perceive evangelism as an external action—a going out. And yet this promise seems to draw us inward as we commit to being Christians in community, with God and with each other, all with God's help. But in order to be the church in the world, we must first be the church. Our common life together in a community of faith is the soil in which we grow, providing the nutrients needed to live out the other four “will you” questions.

Before we examine this promise through the lens of evangelism, though, we need to look at the word “evangelism” itself. For many, the word is a stumbling block. When the subject of evangelism is raised, some of us imagine street preachers holding signs threatening damnation and yelling at passing cars. We balk at the idea of initiating what we imagine will be awkward and intrusive conversations or cringe at the thought of exchanging prayers for donations on television. Perhaps you have other experiences you associate with evangelism—some good, some bad. I invite you to pause here and consider your feelings about the word

“evangelism.” What images come to mind? Before moving deeper into the promises we make at baptism, we must acknowledge these images and stories. Once we’ve named them, we can consciously set them aside to make room for something new.

This study reframes evangelism within the bounds of the Baptismal Covenant. The commitments we make in our baptisms offer a guide to the way we are to interact with the world and the people around us. The newly baptized promise to be disciples in community with each other; to repent of sin; to proclaim the Good News; to look for Christ in all people; and to strive for justice and peace. Every one of these commitments has something to say about evangelism, and that is what we will explore together.



INVITATION

Meditate on the stories and images that come to mind when you think of the word “evangelism.” Presiding Bishop Michael Curry has called Episcopalians to a “way of evangelism grounded in the loving way of Jesus.” What does this look like to you?

Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers?

DAY TWO

Guiding scriptures for this week

Acts 2:42-47

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the

new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

1 Corinthians 12:13-27

For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the

members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

Philippians 4:4-9

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.



INVITATION

These scriptures have guided the writing of this week's reflections. As you prepare for the remainder of the week, consider what the Bible says about fulfilling this week's baptismal promise. Refer back to these verses throughout the week and make a note of additional scripture references that come to mind as you read.

Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers?

DAY THREE

At seven years old, I walked down the aisle at our small Southern Baptist Church to accept Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior. I was baptized soon afterward. I remember the waders the preacher wore under his robe in the giant baptistry. I remember the handkerchief he held up to the sky before putting it over my nose and mouth to dip me backward into the water. I remember changing quickly into my Sunday clothes and sitting in church with wet hair for the rest of the service. But I do not remember what promises I was asked to make that day.

Whether or not I made the promise to “continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers” or something like it, my family took membership in our community of faith seriously. My mother was in the choir. My father taught Sunday School. We ate dinner at church on Wednesdays and breakfast on Sundays. I attended Vacation Bible School, participated in Bible Drill competitions, and was a children’s and then youth choir member and an enthusiastic member of our youth group. I was sure these things would always be a part of my life and my children’s

lives in much the same way as when I attended Auburn University and was convinced that my future would include tailgating at every Auburn home game. Neither of these dreams survived into adulthood.

I now see some of what I did not see then, such as how the church of my youth intentionally excluded some groups of people from full participation in the congregation's life. But despite these significant concerns, I remain grateful for the early formation I received as a part of the Southern Baptist Church, and I miss the intense commitment to community that was such a part of my growing up.



INVITATION

If the church was a part of your childhood, consider how you interacted with your family's congregation. If you were not involved in church as a child, think about another intentional community—Little League, extracurricular activities, etc. What is different about how you participate in church today, and what is the same? Were some groups excluded in those childhood communities? Are they included now? How have these childhood experiences shaped your adult life?

Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers?

DAY FOUR

In the book, *This Band of Sisterhood: Black Women Bishops*, edited by Westina Matthews, Bishop Phoebe Roaf is quoted as asking, “Who is not at the table? It may be a Black body or a Brown body, but it also may be a really young body, or it might be a physically challenged body or a transgendered body. At every instance—whether it’s been the white church or the Black church or at the diocesan level—somebody’s not at the table; and there’s so much fear associated with adding a seat or two.”

The essence of this first “will you” question is that we cannot be complete or equipped for the work we have been given to do without each other. But if we are looking through an evangelism lens, “each other” cannot just include the people currently in the church pews. It must include people not yet here. This can be complicated. For some, a lifetime of rejection by people of faith means they will need more than a sign declaring that “All are welcome here” to be assured they will not have to fight for their place at the table. If any of God’s children are excluded, the body of Christ is diminished, not only in numbers but also in the ability to discern God’s call and to see God’s vision for the world.

There is no way to make more room at a table without expanding the table or asking those already seated to give up some of the space they are currently occupying. “This-is-the-way-it’s-always-been-done-here-like-it-or-leave-it” seems to be more an attitude of assimilation than inclusion. Holding fast to what is central to our identity is important, but true welcome means being open to the gifts that the people we encounter will bring to our community, to the lessons they will teach us, and to the ways they will change us.



INVITATION

There is a tension between holding onto who we are as a community and true welcome and inclusion. In what ways has your current church drawn boundaries, for better or worse, around “the way it’s always been done here?” In what ways has it made room for new perspectives and growth?

Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers?

DAY FIVE

“Continuing in the prayers” is central to our identity. When most people think about Episcopal prayer, they think about the prayers that form the Book of Common Prayer. This approach makes sense because, as Anglicans, we build community around a communal way of worshipping. Prayers included in the services for eucharist and morning and evening prayer are the foundation of our common life together. The prayer book has hundreds of prayers dealing with all sorts of topics and is an important source for a rich prayer life.

But I believe there is room to expand the table while still honoring our traditions. For instance, there is a growing movement to revive and renew the ancient Christian contemplative tradition. In her book *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*, the Rev. Dr. Cynthia Bourgeault makes a case for contemplative prayer “as something that had originally been at the very center of Christian practice and had become lost.” She traces the practice of contemplative prayer back to Jesus himself, noting that his “intentional alternation between contemplation and action was fundamental to his way of being in the world.”

An example of how this practice is being used to build community can be found at the Center for Spiritual Imagination at the Cathedral of the Incarnation in Garden City, New York. Through a weekly contemplative prayer service and periodic spiritual practice retreats, the congregation models a way to “approach just action as a spiritual practice and a fruit of contemplation.”

Another resource for continuing in the prayers is a collection of supplemental liturgical materials called *Enriching Our Worship*. Approved by the wider church in 1997, the collection “is not intended to supplant the Book of Common Prayer, but rather to provide additional resources to assist worshipping communities wishing to expand the language, images, and metaphors used in worship.” Please note that the use of these liturgies must be approved by the bishop.

Prayer according to the Book of Common Prayer is a central part of our tradition in the Episcopal Church, but it was never intended to be the only way we pray.



INVITATION

Think about all the different times, places, and ways you pray. How does your prayer practice lead you to respond to the world around you? This week, explore new ways of praying. You might visit the Contemplative Society's website at contemplative.org and click on "Practices." Try one of the contemplative practices listed that you have never tried before. Another possibility is to read through *Enriching Our Worship* and discuss whether there's a liturgy or set of prayers you'd like your church to consider. Some samples of the liturgies are available online.

To learn more about the Cathedral of the Incarnation Garden City's Center for Spiritual Imagination, visit spiritualimagination.org.



DAY SIX

*Will you continue in the
apostles' teaching and
fellowship, in the breaking
of bread, and in the prayers?*

In the eucharist, we combine our promises to continue in the breaking of bread and in the prayers. At the end of every eucharistic service, we say a post-communion prayer together. In this prayer, we thank God for nourishing us with the eucharistic meal and ask God to send us into the world in ministry. This prayer acknowledges that the bread and wine we have just shared in communion are nourishment for participating in God's work in the world.

Post-communion Prayers

The Book of Common Prayer, pp. 365-366

Eternal God, heavenly Father,
you have graciously accepted us as living members
of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ,
and you have fed us with spiritual food
in the Sacrament of his Body and Blood.
Send us now into the world in peace,
and grant us strength and courage
to love and serve you
with gladness and singleness of heart;
through Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

or the following

Almighty and everliving God,
we thank you for feeding us with the spiritual food
of the most precious Body and Blood
of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ;
and for assuring us in these holy mysteries
that we are living members of the Body of your Son,
and heirs of your eternal kingdom.
And now, Father, send us out
to do the work you have given us to do,
to love and serve you
as faithful witnesses of Christ our Lord.
To him, to you, and to the Holy Spirit,
be honor and glory, now and for ever. *Amen.*



INVITATION

Choose one of the post-communion prayers included in today's reflection and use it to meditate on the work you have been given to do. How does the eucharist nourish and form you for your ministry?

DAY SEVEN

Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?

Prayer for the Unity of the Church

The Book of Common Prayer, p. 818

O God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, our only Savior, the Prince of Peace: Give us grace seriously to lay to heart the great dangers we are in by our unhappy divisions; take away all hatred and prejudice, and whatever else may hinder us from godly union and concord; that, as there is but one Body and one Spirit, one hope of our calling, one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of us all, so we may be all of one heart and of one soul, united in one holy bond of truth and peace, of faith and charity, and may with one mind and one mouth glorify thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

