

“The Sign of Promise”
Genesis 9:12-17

First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

October 19, 2014
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This weekend I performed a wedding for a wonderful young couple in the church. They stood here in the sanctuary and made promises to each other. Promises like, “I’ll be your forever. Even when it doesn’t feel right. Even when you’re sick. Even when we’re poor. Even when it’s hard.”

And then after the vows they took, I said what all ministers say, “do you have rings to exchange with one another?” but in this wedding they said... nah... we didn’t really think that mattered. I mean, we are getting married and we just made these promises, so what does a ring do? We’ll be married without it, right?

Well, of course, I’m kidding. They, like every couple I’ve ever known, put a ring on the other person’s finger and said, “with this ring, I thee wed.” They did that because those rings are signs of the promises that have been made. They are visible reminders of what has been said.

Did the rings make them married? No. Could they be legally married without them? Yes, you can. But you would never want to. Because rings are signs - visible indicators- of the promises that have been made. Furthermore, wedding rings are markers for the world to see. They say, “I belong to someone.” When my beautiful wife is out in public and all the young men see her and start scheming about how they are going to get to know this beautiful woman, they see her wedding ring and get very disappointed. Because that ring says she belongs to someone. Me!

We are going to talk today about baptism. The sign and marker that God has given us to show us his promises to us. We’ll be using Genesis 9 as our starting point, but talking more topically about what baptism is, what it signifies, and why that should matter to us.

What we've seen over the last few weeks in Genesis are 2 things in particular—God's judgment on sin and rebellion against him, and God's salvation of human beings and the world and his continued promise of renewal.

If you're new or a guest with us today, let me give you a short recap: in Genesis 6, we learn that sin and corruption had gotten so bad on the earth that God says the intention of man's heart is evil continually. And God sets out to punish that sin and destroy what He had created. He brings a flood up on the earth that wipes everything out. Everything, of course, except for Noah and his family and representatives of all of animal kind. In Genesis 8, we hear these wonderful words, that although everything around was covered with water and all life died, God remembered Noah and saved he and his family and those animals with him through the waters of judgment. We saw God maintaining his covenant of faithfulness and his promise to redeem the world even in the face of great wickedness on the earth. And then after God has rescued, he gives Noah a sign. A rainbow. A sign that God would keep his promise. A visible representation that God saves.

Likewise, throughout the Bible, God provides signs that confirm his promises. The rainbow here confirms his promise to Noah and to the world. The sign of circumcision confirms the promise God makes to Abraham. The Passover acts as a sign to Israel when they are rescued out of slavery in Egypt. The Bible says even the Sabbath is a sign of God's salvation.

And as God's Covenant people—that's what the Bible calls the Church now—as God's people, we have been brought into his promises and have been given signs that confirm these promises. We call them sacraments. Baptism and the Lord's Supper. We are going to talk about one of them this morning: Baptism. Let me warn you that we are only going to scratch the surface. I'm going to leave some things out that will need more discussion. I will probably say some things that will need more discussion. So let's discuss! Come find me or Gerrit, or one of the other pastors and we'll set up a time to talk.

Christian theologians for centuries have called baptism both a sign and a seal. We're going to spend the rest of our time this morning breaking that down a little... so let's dig in and take a look at what these two things mean.

First, what is a sign? We see it here in Genesis 9 and we see it elsewhere in the Bible, but what is a sign really? Well the simplest answer I think is how the theologian John Frame says it—a sign is a divinely authorized dramatic image. A *divinely authorized dramatic image. A dramatized truth.* A sign shows in action, the truth of what has been promised. A sign is a visible representation of what is true about God and about his promises. And what does it do? Well, one of the primary things it does is give *assurance*.

Think about driving on a long car trip. You're tired. The kids are throwing goldfish at your head. The seat is uncomfortable. And you're thinking, I know we are getting closer. We HAVE to be getting closer. Baton Rouge is near, I just know it.

When we come back from Texas, on the long stretch of I-10, after you've gotten off the bridge that never ends, you know Baton Rouge is coming soon. But it still feels so far away. And my kids are saying, "when are we going to be there?" Soon! Soon! And I don't know if you've experienced this or not, but there is a stretch of highway that cuts through the pine trees and when you come around one bend, what you see right at the end of the highway the state capitol. It's directly in front of you. Then, because of the landscape, it goes away and you can't see it for a while, but it's a wonderful sign. I can say, "Look kids! The capitol! We're close. I haven't been lying to you!" The capitol is a dramatic image for us of the reality of home and it assures my kids (and me!).

In the Bible, the signs that God sets up show his covenant promises. They are dramatic images that are intended to teach us about who God is and what He has promised us. The rainbow was meant to teach Noah of God's promise. Every time it rained, as Noah undoubtedly grew nervous about whether that rain would stop, the rainbow was a reassuring sign of what God had promised. It's meant to teach us the same thing. That's what signs do. They are visible words for us to believe about who God is and what He has promised to us.

So what about Baptism? What is it a sign of? Well, simply put, it is a sign that God saves, and specifically, that God forgives sins. It is a sign of God's promise to save those who don't deserve it. It's a sign that God will accept us on the merit of His righteousness rather than our own.

Think of it as a mini play—a drama enacting what God does for those who put their faith in him. As the water runs down the head of those baptized, we are enacting the truth of how God cleanses us, washing away sin and renewing us in his grace. Making us those who are no longer dirty with sin but are presented to him as clean and forgiven.

Now, it's good for us to pause here and clearly define what baptism does NOT signify. It is not a sign that *creates* salvation. The person is not saved simply because they have been baptized. As well, it is not a sign that the person being baptized has made a particular decision. If that were the case, we would not baptize infants who can make no such decision. Neither is it a sign that conversion has already taken place, that forgiveness of sins has already been enacted, or that this person is clinging to Christ in faith. **Rather—and this is very important—it is a sign of the truth of God's promise to save sinners. It is a visual testimony to the truth that God cleanses those who cling to him by faith.** It's a sign, not of some truth about the person being baptized, but a sign of the truth about who God is and what He has promised to do. It's a sign of what is true about God more than a sign about what is true of me.

Let's turn to the second category now—a seal. Baptism is called not just a sign, but a *seal*. Now, that word can be very confusing for us because it can mean a few different things. When I think of a seal, I typically think about a Zip-lock bag. Seal it up and nothing will spill out. But that's not the kind of seal that we are talking about here. When we talk about a seal we mean it in a number of ways: it's a *pledge* and it's a *mark* and it's a *call*.

Returning to the analogy of a wedding, this is what rings do, especially the engagement ring. It acts as a pledge that the groom will keep his promise. A fiancé who has been proposed to with no ring might feel a little nervous. But if you've given me something valuable, something you worked hard to purchase, then I have assurance that your promise is true.

When we say that baptism is a seal we are saying that God has pledged that he will fulfill his promises. That when people call on him in faith, he will save. It's a pledge given by God that he will honor his promise to all who put their faith in him.

When we say that sacraments are seals, we also mean it's a mark. Think of the presidential seal or the seal that a king would have marked on a document. It's the seal that marks who the sign is coming from. If you received a letter with the presidential seal on it, you would know who it came from and that it was of great importance. That engagement ring marks that future bride as one who has been claimed. Baptism is such a marker. The one baptized is marked as belonging to God's covenant people, whether that's a child or an adult.

The seal is also a call to discipleship. As being marked as belonging to God's Covenant people, the baptized person is called to respond appropriately, whether that response is now, as an adult, or over the course of age, as in the case of a baptized child. You have been given the mark of one of Christ's own—now take up these promises and follow him.

Let me try to summarize. What all of this is saying—both the sign and the seal—is that in Baptism, **God is showing us that he saves sinners**. He is showing us his promises and marking us as those who belong to His people. And when we get baptized or when we baptize our children, we are claiming that promise and proclaiming that God has claimed us and we are now obligated to faithfulness. He has given us his ring to wear to show his promises to us and to show that we belong to him.

Let's make this a little more applicable to us today. What do we do with this? What makes this so important? Well, let me first ask you, have you ever struggled to believe if God will provide for you? Have you ever struggled to believe that God will take care of you, will really fulfill your needs? Have you ever wondered if, in the midst of difficult family decisions or frightening and insecure times in your life, God will really come through with his promises to be your fullness, your significance. Have you ever wondered when looking at your patterns of sin whether God could actually accept someone like you, someone who has strayed so far.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we had some sort of assurance of God's promises? Wouldn't it be great if we had some sort of visual representation of who God is and his promise to save us and care for us? Well, of course, we do. This is what

baptism is for us. A sign and a seal of who God is and what he has promised. A promise that we are continually invited into.

So what should we do? Well, first, if the Lord is working in you to reveal your need for his cleansing grace. If you have seen your need and have seen the wonderful grace of Christ in forgiving sinners, then come and be baptized! We would be thrilled to receive this profession and to celebrate his sign of God's promises together.

Secondly, if you are a baptized member of this church and your children have not been baptized, let me encourage you to do so. The bible tells us in Acts 2 that the promise—the promise of salvation by grace through faith—is for not only you but your children as well. Come and mark them as those who are members of God's people. Put upon them the sign of God's mercy and grace. Remember, this is a sign not of what is going on in their hearts, but of what is true about God's heart.

And third, for all of us, enjoy the sign! It's for you. Every time we baptize someone, we are proclaiming what is true for you and for me as well as what is true for the one being baptized—God saves sinners, and I am one of those sinners he has saved! Every time we baptize someone we are proclaiming that God cleanses, God marks us as his own, God calls us to follow him. If you're wondering if he will provide, if he will care for you, if he will fulfill you, this sign is for you!