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Open our hearts and minds, O Lord, that your word may be heard, received and inwardly digested. Amen.

Just a few Sundays ago on the day that commemorated the baptism of our Lord, we made a change in our usual liturgy. Did you notice? We substituted The Baptismal Covenant in our liturgy in place of the Nicene Creed. Now, I love the Nicene Creed. It is language that ties us to the roots of our liturgical heritage; a heritage that predates even the 4th century Council of Nicea from which the Nicene Creed emerged. The body of prayers that we say leading up to sharing the bread and wine is called the Liturgy of Holy Eucharist. That liturgy can be traced back to words used in worship from the early second century. Did you know it was that old? The literary and spiritual heritage that we claim is ancient and it has a very deep and solid foundation.

The language of the Baptismal Covenant is different. It doesn't have roots quite that deep but the concepts that ground it do. The Baptismal Covenant starts out with a series of questions about what we Episcopal Christians believe; particularly what we believe about God, Christ and the Holy Spirit. Then the covenant moves into a second series of questions. This set of questions defines specific actions that baptized believers are expected to be willing to take in response to their previously affirmed beliefs. An affirmative response to this second set of questions is answered by the candidate saying, "I will, with God's help."

Obviously, anything that we do we can do better with God's help. But these actions in particular demand strong cooperative action from God. What are these actions? First, will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in the prayers. We do that right here in this sacred and holy

space each week. Check. Second, will you persevere in resisting evil, and whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord? We confess our sins each week in this service of Holy Eucharist in an act of repentance and then we turn to the Lord's table to reunite in full relationship with God. Third, I'll get to the third in a minute. Fourth, Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? We have an enormous outflowing of love from the people of this parish to our surrounding neighbors in so many restorative ways. We will be highlighting some of those during our Lenten Supper program. So, check. And fifth, will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being? Our prayers each week focus on these issues both locally and abroad. We exhibit kindness in our thoughts and actions. We welcome everyone to join us in our worship.

So what about the third question? The third question is the one that links to today's readings. The third question asks, "Will you **proclaim** by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?" I emphasize the word proclaim on purpose.

Merriam Webster Online Dictionary defines proclaim two ways. The first definition says - to declare publicly, typically insistently, proudly, or defiantly and in either speech or writing : announce. The second definition says - to give outward indication of : show.

I think this one question gives most protestant Christians, that is to say a lot of Episcopalians some trouble. Most of us don't like to declare publicly or insistently *anything* about our faith. I mean, doesn't the Bible say, too, that we shouldn't wear our faith on our sleeves? In Matthew 6:1, Jesus says, "Be careful not to perform your righteous acts before men to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from

your Father in heaven.” And in Matthew 6:2, Jesus says, “So when you give to the needy, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be praised by men.” So how are we then to proclaim the Good News of God in Christ?

Consider today’s scriptures. The Old Testament reading is from Isaiah. Isaiah was a prophet, that is to say a messenger from God to God’s people. He spoke to the people with great passion, beseeching them to return to God after they had gone astray. He implored them not to give up on God who created them, and to live in harmony with God and with each other. “Have you not known,” he asks. “Have you not heard?” Our God is the Holy One who has made all things, who reigns over the rulers of the earth. “He does not faint or grow weary: ... our God strengthens the powerless.” And those who wait for and have hope in their relationship with God will soar like eagles and run the race of life without fainting.

Now that’s proclamation; poetic and **public** proclamation! Those words are inspirational. We can literally feel them lift us up. Good teachers and great speakers do that. But not all of us have those gifts. The good news is that by God’s grace we all have different gifts. Can you even imagine a room full of magnificent speakers all vying to speak at once? No, there have to be people in the room who are just really good listeners. We all have gifts and God desires for us to use them.... All of them. If we each used our varied gifts to work in harmony toward God’s goal of justice and peace, we’d get there wouldn’t we?

So what do the people do who don’t have the gift of speaking publicly, of persuading others to turn toward God? Well, and this is not meant as a joke, we can

make sandwiches. Really. God blesses the sandwich makers. We heard in Mark's gospel this morning that Jesus went from teaching and healing in the synagogue across town to Andrew and Simon's house only to find that Simon's mother-in-law was ill. The scripture tells us that Jesus took her by the hand and lifted her up. When he did that, the fever left her and she began to serve them. Jesus took her by the hand. He touched her. Touch is so important here. Jesus's words touch us and we touch others. In touching, Jesus made the woman in this story whole. He restored her health. Is touching a way of proclaiming? Is having a relationship with our neighbor a way to touch them and make them whole? I think it is.

In our world today, there seems to be a void of charismatic leaders who can proclaim God's message the way that Isaiah proclaimed it. In the recent past, at least in my lifetime, charismatic speakers have grabbed the hearts and minds of Americans on television and on the radio. People stopped what they were doing and took seats to listen to them. I think in some way we long for voices like that; voices that inspire commitment and action; especially God-centered commitment and action.

But even without those voices, God sees **us** and God knows that we are able through our various gifts to act on his behalf; to shift the direction of our cultural tide. The western culture seems to be drifting toward the murky shore of secularism; toward a hopeless humanism. But here **we** are, a group of faithful believers; a group of people who can proclaim by example, by efforts both large and small, that Christ is alive and well among us; we can proclaim that we hear God calling us. We can proclaim by example that our intent is to respond faithfully knowing that God will help.

Christianity began and gained strength by being affirmed in social settings, by efforts large and small; in places like Andrew and Simon's house. The most significant moments in Christian life happened then, as they do now, in daily life; in mundane and seemingly fleeting moments - in a friendly exchange with a neighbor or stranger, in putting a bandage on a child's scraped knee, in delivering a meal, in packing backpacks of food for hungry children, and maybe even in sharing a story with someone about how and where and when God has shown up in your life. In daily life we live out the promises made in our Baptismal Covenant.

Just this past Thursday in the Women's Book Group we were discussing the meaning of covenant. A member of the group, Jata Craighill, explained it this way. An agreement is like a handshake in which two people put hands together, hands meeting at the palm. A covenant is when two people grasp each other instead at the forearm. With a handshake, when one person lets go the hold is broken. With a covenantal grasp, when one person lets go the hold is not broken. The other still has a firm hold. Folks, God has made a covenant with us. We acknowledge and affirm its reality in our baptismal covenant. Whether we proclaim the Good News of it publicly and loudly or quietly by example, we are called to proclaim it. That's our end of the bargain, and God has promised to help us keep it. God has made a covenant with **us**, my friends, and will never, ever let us go.