THE THINGS THAT MAKE FOR LIFE: Meditations on the Baptismal Vows

Six Weekday Evening Adult Curriculum

By John S. Mogabgab

"I Will With God's Help"

The Baptismal Covenant
The Book Of Common Prayer,
Pages 304-05

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<tr>
<th>CELEBRANT</th>
<th>PEOPLE</th>
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<td>Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the</td>
<td>I WILL, WITH GOD'S HELP.</td>
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<td>breaking of bread, and in the prayers?</td>
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<td>Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into</td>
<td>I WILL, WITH GOD'S HELP.</td>
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<td>sin, repent and return to the Lord?</td>
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<td>Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?</td>
<td>I WILL, WITH GOD'S HELP.</td>
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<td>Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor</td>
<td>I WILL, WITH GOD'S HELP.</td>
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<td>as yourself?</td>
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<td>Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and</td>
<td>I WILL, WITH GOD'S HELP.</td>
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<td>respect the dignity of every human being?</td>
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"THE THINGS THAT MAKE FOR LIFE:
Meditations on the Baptismal Vows"

COURSE DESCRIPTION
This course provides an opportunity for reflection on the meaning of the baptismal vows for our life and faith today. The long-standing disciplines of prayer with Scripture, spiritual reading, and group sharing will be employed to help participants explore the implications of renouncing evil in all its dimensions (cosmic, corporate, personal) and committing oneself to Jesus Christ through acceptance, trust and obedience. It is hoped that through this course participants will gain a new appreciation for the call, the cost and the joy of Christian discipleship.


COURSE STRUCTURE
Opening greeting and prayer (e.g., the Collect for Baptism, BCP, p. 254, #10)
Presentation by leader on theme for the day (30-45 minutes).
Break for coffee and quiet conversation (10-15 minutes).
Group discussion (one hour).
Close with a circle of prayer.

COURSE OUTLINE
Part I. The Renunciation of Evil
A. "The Spiritual Warfare: Confronting the Cosmic Combatants"
   Texts: Psalm 16; Ephesians 6:10-18
   Supplementary Texts: I Peter 5:8-9
B. "The World Watch: Resisting the Principalities and Powers"
   Texts: Psalm 10; Romans 12:2
   Supplementary Texts: Amos 5:7-13; I John 2:15-17
C. "The Personal Struggle: Overcoming the Distractions Within"
   Texts: Psalm 51; Galatians 5:13-26
   Supplementary Texts: Romans 7:14-20; II Peter 1:3-11; 2:11-22

Part II. The Commitment to Jesus Christ
D. "The Antiphon of Acceptance: 'Who Do You Say That I Am?'"
   Texts: Psalm 91; Matthew 14:22-33
   Supplementary Texts: Matthew 13:4-23; Mark 10:46-52; John 17:11-19
E. "The Time of Trust: In the World But Not of It"
   Supplementary Texts: Matthew 8:23-27; Philippians 2:1-11
Leader’s Guide
Introductory Note

The “Leader’s Guide” to the Sunday morning Lenten study series on the sacrament of Baptism provides detailed guidance in the pedagogical process, the main themes, and the specific resources for each class meeting. This seemed desirable in a document designed to introduce parish education leaders to one way (among others) of offering spiritual instruction to God’s people. Moreover, the first course on Baptism reflects a reasoned sequence of thought whose inner connections might not have been apparent from the thematic titles for each week. Therefore, some elaboration seemed necessary.

The present course on the Baptismal vows does not require such a graphic Guide. The progression of themes from one week to the next is quite clear, and a general approach to the structure and style of the classes is given in the first Guide. For these reasons, the discussion of each week’s vow is limited to a brief description of the leader’s task, a listing of some central questions or issues that might guide the attention of the class, and one or more resources for leaders to help them prepare for the sessions. Maxie Dunnam’s Alive In Christ is but one example of a readable exposition of Christian spiritual growth. Other books could certainly be substituted. In any case, the purpose of assigning such a book is to provide class participants with common spiritual reading for the entire course. Leaders can choose how best to incorporate the spiritual reading into class presentations and discussions.

It might be well to conclude with the observation that a succession of correlations link the vows of renunciation to those of affirmation. To accept Jesus as Saviour is to make a decision of cosmic proportions about the power of good (Vows 1 and 4). To trust Jesus empowers us to be in the world but not of it (Vows 2 and 5). And obedience to Jesus is the basis for resistance to sin in personal life (Vows 3 and 6). These three correlations testify to the rhythm of renunciation and affirmation in the Christian life, a rhythm initiated by God’s gracious ways with us. That God renounces the evil within and around us while at the same time affirming our person is the rich soil that nourishes all the things that make for life.

Part I:
The Renunciation of Evil

Leader’s Guide
Week I

“The Spiritual Warfare: Confronting the Cosmic Combatants”

TASK

1. To introduce participants to the overarching theme of Part I by exploring what it means to renounce something. There is great power in such an act because it involves an explicit confrontation and decision. Select several instances of confrontation and renunciation in Jesus’ ministry for brief discussion.

2. To provide a sound Scriptural account of who/what Satan and the “spiritual forces” are.

3. To begin probing the meaning of this first vow for contemporary Christian life (how is it to be interpreted?) and for the lives of class members (what bearing does it have on my life? our life together as a parish?). Especially important here is to grapple with the meaning of a cosmic dimension to evil that transcends corrupt institutions and disordered individuals.

QUESTIONS

1. What do participants think about the language of renunciation? How have confrontation and renunciation shaped their own faith journey?

2. In Ephesians 6:12, Paul speaks of evil as “the darkness in the world.” How do class members experience evil? What forms of evil are they most familiar with?

3. In that same verse Paul mentions the “Sovereignities and Powers . . . , the spiritual army of evil in the heavens.” How do participants think of evil? What images or concepts come to mind to express the meaning of evil in their lives?

4. Psalm 16 expresses a deep sense of finding refuge in the Lord, who will show us “the path of life” (Ps. 16:11). Is Paul’s list of God’s “armour” helpful in directing us toward such a path in the midst of “the darkness in the world”? 
Leader's Guide

Week II

"The World Watch: Resisting the Principalities and Powers"

TASK
1. To clarify the Pauline concept of the "world" (αἰών).
2. To present and emphasize the Biblical conviction that there is an elusive yet real corporate dimension to the forces in the world that "corrupt and destroy the creatures of God."
3. To consider what might be involved in the work of renouncing such forces.

QUESTIONS
1. In Romans 12:2 Paul identifies a tension between Christian behaviour and that of the "world." At what points in their life, if any, do class members experience a similar tension? Do they agree that such a tension exists? Do they accept Paul's warning?
2. What are some contemporary examples of the "evil powers of this world" described in Psalm 10 and the supplementary Biblical texts?
3. Paul affirms that the "new mind" of Christ is the way to resist conformity to the world and move toward conformity to God's will. Because it is the mind of Christ, it has a corporate aspect that follows from the whole theology of Christ's corporate identity (see the Leader's Guide, "A New Mind, A New Heart," p. 7). Thus, Paul perceives one corporate reality (the "new mind") standing over against another (the "world"). Here, and throughout the work on the vows of renunciation, leaders may want to examine the place of Christian community in sustaining and guiding resistance to the "principalities and powers." What forms of such resistance have been, or could be, undertaken in your parish?

Leader's Guide

Week III

"The Personal Struggle: Overcoming the Distractions Within"

TASK
1. To emphasize that we can only look upon and understand our brokenness in the light of God's love. It is not accidental that Psalm 51 begins with an affirmation of God's loving-kindness (see also Psalm 139).
2. In the context established by this affirmation, to help participants identify the forms of evil in personal life that draw them away from God's love.
3. To explore the contrast between bondage and freedom in Galatians 5:13-26. To relate that contrast to growth in the spiritual life (e.g., a growing intimacy with God rather than distance from God).
4. To consider some ways in which the Christian community could be (or already is) a source of guidance and encouragement in the personal struggle against the distractions within. Note, in this connection, Paul's mention of "fraternal correction" in Galatians 6:1 and mutual ministry in Galatians 5:13 and 6:2.

QUESTIONS
1. Numerous theologians and psychologists have noted that in recent years the concept of sin has lost currency in North American Christianity. In light of this finding, it might be worthwhile to begin the discussion by asking class members how they understand sin. Is sin in personal life a factor in their perception of their relationship with God? With one another? How do they respond to Psalm 51?
2. Paul has his own list of associations with the word "self-indulgence." What kinds of experiences and/or attitudes do class members place in the same category as "self-indulgence?"
3. Do the terms "bondage" and "distraction" appropriately express the views of sin held by class
participants? What other images or phrases could convey the meaning of sin in personal life?

4. Where in their personal life are class members experiencing liberation from various forms of personal bondage or distraction? In what dimensions of their personal life are they discovering the fruits of the Spirit Paul enumerates in Galatians 5:22-23?

RESOURCES

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**Part II: The Commitment to Jesus Christ**

**Leader’s Guide**

**Week IV**

"The Antiphon of Acceptance: ‘Who Do You Say That I Am?’"

**TASK**

1. The power of renunciation is intimately related to the power of commitment. As a way of introducing this second set of Baptismal vows, consider mentioning and reflecting upon the correlation between Vows 1 and 4 mentioned in the Introductory Note to this Guide.

2. To help participants understand the magnitude of this vow by providing some Biblical materials and theological perspectives on the meaning of accepting Jesus Christ as Saviour. The two key terms for analysis might be “accept” and “Saviour.” Note that a word study of the name and title “Jesus Christ” would offer guidance in determining the specific meanings of “accept” and “Saviour.”

3. To help people see the connections between this act of acceptance and a faith perception of Jesus’ identity (i.e., who we think he is shapes the way in which we accept him).

4. To help class members articulate their own understandings of who Jesus is and what he has accomplished, and perhaps to compare these views with selections from the range of Scriptural testimony on these two subjects.

**QUESTIONS**

1. Matthew 16:13-17 confronts us with the Christological question. At first Jesus asks his disciples an indirect question: “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” This invites a factual or perhaps theologically informed response, but not necessarily a response that is committed. Then follows the devastatingly direct question: “But you, who do you say that I am?” That question is addressed to each of us. Who do class members say that Jesus is? Consider asking class participants to spend one half hour alone following the leader’s meditation. Their assignment during this time would be to write a short statement of belief (a creed) in response to these questions: “Who is Jesus Christ for you?” and “What has he accomplished?” (Note: this assignment could also be announced at the end of the previous week’s class, thus allowing participants a week to reflect on these questions.) Devote considerable time to sharing and discussing these personal credos.

2. In Psalm 27 the Psalmist expresses the confident hope of seeing “the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living” (v.17). How might acceptance of Jesus as Saviour represent the fulfillment of this hope? What other connections might be discerned between seeing “the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living” and accepting Jesus as Saviour?

3. Here and throughout Part II, leaders may wish to encourage reflection on how the Christian community can help to foster acceptance, trust and obedience in our relationship with God.

**RESOURCES**

Leader's Guide

Week V

"The Time Of Trust: In The World But Not Of It"

TASK
1. To underscore the central place of trust in the New Testament concept of faith (pistis) as a counterbalance to popular perceptions of "faith" as belief in certain dogmatic propositions.
2. To help participants identify and share the tensions they experience between putting their "whole trust" in Jesus and living in our contemporary world. Also, to help them reflect on where this trust is triumphing in their lives.
3. To draw attention to the correlation between trusting God's love made visible in Jesus Christ and distrusting the "principalities and powers" (Vows 2 and 5).

QUESTIONS
1. Matthew 14:22-33 provides us with a marvelous image of being in the world but not of it: walking on water. The wind and waves are dramatic symbols of the turbulent forces in the world in the midst of which Jesus calls us to come to him in trust. Peter responds to this call and then immediately finds himself caught between the powers of the world (the headwind) and the call of Jesus. This situation frightens him, his trust falters, and he sinks back into the world. It is a drama with which we are all familiar. What forms has this drama assumed in the experiences of class members? What "headwinds" do they battle as they strive to put their "whole trust" in Jesus? In what ways do they find themselves sinking back into the "world"?
2. How do class members interpret the idea that the calling of the Christian is to be "in but not of the world"?
3. To what extent does Psalm 91 provide us with a compelling description of what it would mean to trust in God's love and grace?

RESOURCES

Leader's Guide

Week VI

"The Offering Of Obedience: Hearing And Responding To God's Love"

TASK
1. To help class members move toward a more spiritual (and perhaps less authoritarian) understanding of faithful obedience.
2. To explore the relation between obedience and freedom (in part by drawing attention to the correlation between Vows 3 and 6). This might include some consideration of the distinction between "freedom from" and "freedom for."
3. To bring to a conclusion, in a way appropriate to the group, this six-week series on the Baptismal vows.

QUESTIONS
1. Luke 5:1-11 reveals at least five facets of Christian obedience. First, obedience brings us into the "deep water" of complete reliance upon God. Second, obedience is the source of a rich harvest of the things that make for life ("a huge number of fish"). Third, obedience enables us to perceive who we are in relation to God ("Leave me, Lord... "). Fourth, obedience nourishes a freedom from things that could inhibit our love for God ("they left everything"; see also Psalm 119:14). And fifth, obedience leads to a freedom for response to God's love ("and followed him"). How do class members conceive of Christian obedience?
2. Have class participants experienced any of the five dimensions of obedience discernible in the Scripture text for this class? Can they add to this list?
3. Is the relation between obedience and freedom something that makes sense to class members? Can they recall concrete examples of this relation in their own life or the life of another person?
4. What might be some corporate expressions of the relation between obedience and freedom in the Christian community?

RESOURCES
1. article on "obedience" in The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible, Vol. III.

Further Resources on Baptism


BIBLIOGRAPHY BY

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