

Promises

In a few moments we will stand with parents Grier and Chris at this font of baptism. We'll quote some scripture, be asked some questions, and make some solemn promises. Then we'll pray and pour as much water as we can upon Aria Gabriella, child of the covenant.

Perhaps you've heard it said that when infants like Aria are baptized, the parents make vows on behalf of their child. **WRONG!** Nobody can make a vow on behalf of someone else, adult or child. No, we make these vows for ourselves.

I will be asking Grier and Chris if they will be Christ's faithful disciples, "obeying his word and showing his love." Not only that, I'll ask them if they will nurture Aria "in the life and faith of the Christian community." (That's the new wording. I still love the old words: "the nurture and admonition of the Lord.")

Of course, Chris and Grier won't be taking on that awesome task by themselves, for we, too have promises to make. We will promise "to guide and nurture Aria by word and deed, with love and prayer." We will pledge to "encourage her to know, trust, and follow Christ, and to be a faithful member his church."

Those are daunting promises, no less important than the marriage vows that Grier and Chris made standing right there on a Sunday morning seven years ago. Daunting for these young parents and no less daunting for you and me.

Before we join Chris, Grier, and Aria at this font, let's go to the place today's Gospel reading takes us. Let's join Jesus and his disciples in the region of Caesarea Philippi, way up in the northwest corner of Galilee near the foot of Mount Herman. There's a temple up there built by King Herod to honor Caesar Augustus, the Emperor. There's also an ancient shrine to the Greek god Pan. It's the perfect place for Jesus to be asking us where our true loyalties lie.

"Who do people say that I am?" Jesus wants to know.

There are all sorts of answers to that question, aren't there? Our fellow disciples offer a few. "Some say you're John the Baptist come back to life. Others say you might be Elijah, or maybe one of the other prophets."

We could add to the list, couldn't we? "Well, some say you're a wise but naïve philosopher. Others that you're a social reformer, and still others that you're the champion of free market capitalism in the good old U.S.A., that Christian nation.

Interesting theories, all of them, but then Jesus asks, "**Who do you say that I am?**"

Maybe you're thinking, *Well, Jesus that's a very personal question. I'm not sure it's fair to ask me this in front of all these people. Isn't it enough that I'm here, standing with everybody else? Do I have to answer now? Out loud?*

Our colleague Peter has no such reservations. "**You are the Messiah,**" he says. The rest of us are looking around to make sure nobody outside the inner circle heard Peter say that.

Shush, Peter! Not so loud. "Messiah" means "Anointed One." In Greek, the word is "Christ." That's a strong word, a dangerous word. The Emperor uses that word to describe himself. Down the road at Caesarea Philippi there's a statue of the Emperor with an inscription that says he's the "son of God." Calling Jesus "the Messiah" – well, it's a risky thing to do.

Why, if you and I were to do that today, people would think we're weird. They'd call us intolerant, close-minded, unenlightened, even insensitive to people of other faiths. We don't want to give people the wrong idea. Words like "Messiah" and "Christ" – well you have to admit, they sound awfully religious. Far better to be "spiritual" without being religious, don't you think? That goes down a lot better at dinner parties.

Jesus is talking again. He's saying that the Son of Man will have to undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed. And after three days rise again.

Peter takes Jesus aside. We can't hear everything they're saying, but you can tell Peter is very upset with Jesus. Now they're back with us, and Jesus looking straight at us, even though he's addressing Peter. "**Get behind me, Satan,**" he says. "**For you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things.**"

By now a crowd has gathered, and Jesus is talking about what it will cost to keep following him. It requires taking up a cross, he's saying. It requires denying oneself. It involves losing one's life in order to save it.

The disciples standing next to us at Caesarea Philippi look very confused. Take up a cross? Deny one's self? Lose your life in order to save it? They aren't clear what Jesus means by all of that. As we leave them, they are deciding if they really want to keep following Jesus.

Now, here we are, back at this font, called in these waters to follow Jesus, to be his disciples, to raise up Aria to be his disciple, too.

Those disciples back at Caesarea Philippi didn't know for sure what they were getting into. Neither did we when we first came to these waters. It wasn't until they followed Jesus to Jerusalem and witnessed what happened to him that they realized what can happen to anyone who embodies the love of God for the world. They had to see Jesus pinned to that cross. They had to see that empty tomb and hear the good news that he is risen before they could know that he is indeed the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Mark records that most of the disciples assembled on that day in Caesarea Philippi did stop following Jesus – at least for a while. On that night in the garden when he was arrested and taken away, most of them scattered like lost sheep. But they came back, say the other Gospel writers, and the risen Christ welcomed them just the same, and told them, "Follow me."

As you and I stand at this font and renew our promises to be Christ's faithful disciples, we can't be certain what that will mean for each of us. It might mean turning away from that colleague who is telling that racist joke at the office water fountain. It might mean spending some time with a homeless neighbor and hearing his or her story without judging. It might mean altering your lifestyle by accumulating less and giving away more. I might mean orienting your priorities to reflect the values of the kingdom Jesus the Christ embodied.

It will certainly mean denying yourself – not the self that reflects the image of God, but the self that is turned inward upon itself, the self that has no room for others, the self that is already dying.

To be a disciple of Jesus the Messiah is to die to that self in these waters, and to be raised to new life in him.

As we strive to keep the promises we make in this sacrament, we'll be teaching Aria to follow Jesus, too. She'll learn the stories, pray the prayers, sing the hymns, observe our interactions, hear our confessions, join us at this Table, share our common life. Then, one day, God willing, Aria will stand at this font and make these same vows for herself.

I don't want to give you the wrong idea. The promises we make at this font are important, but they're not the most important pledge stirring in these waters. The most important promise is the one that God made long ago, when God said to us, **"I will be your God and you will be my people."**

Or, as Peter put it, **"The promise is you and to your children, and to all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God calls."**

Aria's baptism begins today, but it won't end until she draws her final breath. Today she enters the family formed by God's covenant promise. That promise that has never, and will never, be broken.