

“The Produce of Canaan”

Lent IV March 31, 2019

Hope Church, Sheboygan

©Rev. William P. Te Winkle, Sr.

God is in the ‘saving business.’ The whole of the story of Israel, which is our story too, is to teach us the how serious, how persistent, how faithful God is to God’s people in saving them. God is not in the ‘punishing business’, as if God delights in setting us up for ‘gotcha’ moments for which he can make us miserable. No, God invites us into the Land of Plenty, the Land of Milk and Honey, the Land of Blessings. God invites us to cross the Jordan River and to enter the land of Canaan and to live forever off of the produce of Canaan.

Who is on God’s invitation list, to receive the blessings of the Land of Promise? Well, to start, Nora. Now, Nora’s family nods in agreement at this bold statement because she is, of course, a perfect child and grandchild. We know that Grandma Anne. But there may be a few of you out there, who not knowing Nora from anyone, who asks, ‘How do you know, Pastor Bill?’

Well, let me tell you how I know that. Because, what we said today, as I was the given the privilege of watching God bring Nora through the waters and saw her rise to life, and what we said as we placed the mark of the cross on her head,

I believe it. I believe it, friends, about Nora, and about each of you. I don't know every name that is on the invitation list, but I know it is an open invitation to every name in the world.

Because God is in the saving business, that's how I know. I know that 38 years before our story from Joshua begins the people of Israel were at the doorstep of the Promised Land and then they failed to believe it could be true for them. They feared giants in the land, people so large that they felt like grasshoppers in their presence. So, instead of entering the blessings God to which God had delivered them from Egypt, they turned back.

I don't know about you, but I can relate. I don't know how many times in my life God had planned something for my life which would have been a great blessing, but instead of summoning up the faith to follow, I turned back and wandered around in the desert for a long time. The waters seem too deep. The cities seem too fortified. The enemy I faced seemed too strong. So, instead of following God I turned back.

But here is what I also know, and something you can relate to as well, I hope. God keeps bringing us back to the waters of the Jordan River. God keeps

bringing us to a place where if we will take the first step of faith, then God will carry us safely to blessings we could not imagine for ourselves.

And that is what finally happened of the nation of Israel. God took across the Jordan River, just like he had before taken through the Red Sea as they left Egypt, and they entered the land. I believe that God does this not just for individuals, but for communities of God's people still today. I believe that if we as a church agree to faithfully follow God, even when the hurdles seem to high, even when the change seems to stark, especially when we are afraid of drowning in the river, if we will keep on walking in faith God will show us blessings we cannot yet conceive. May God give us that courage, to cross the Jordan despite our worries and fears so that we can be blessed to be a blessing.

(SLIDE Joshua 5:1) The effect of following God across the Jordan was miraculous. The enemies of Israel feared them. Well, not actually. They feared the God of Israel. "Their hearts melted in fear and they no longer had courage to face the Israelites." God is bigger and stronger than your enemies. What enemy is staring you down today? Who or what do you fear about tomorrow? What is holding you back from the life God desires you to live? Trust God to strike fear into those

enemies for you. God is carrying you through waters and your enemies hearts will melt in fear.

(SLIDE-5:2) So, what happens next is pretty graphic, but important for us to talk about in church. Because what happens next is why we baptized Nora today. Stay with me here. After the people crossed into the Promised Land God instructed all of the men to be circumcised. So, they made flint knives. OK. Let's all say 'ouch' and get over that part. Instead, focus on the miracle of faith here. The people were finally in the other side of the Jordan, in the presence of their enemies, and the first thing they do is disable their army, to a man, for days. "Until they were healed."

Who thought that this was a good idea? God. You won't find a human battle plan that says the first thing you do is wound your army while surrounded by the enemy. God is in the saving business, and we are in the faith business. You see, you cannot save yourself at all. If you come up with your own plan for salvation in this life or the next, your plans will fail. You will be defeated. But, if you are faithful enough to follow God's instructions, absurd as they may seem, prepare to be blessed!

But listen friends, sometimes that plan mean waiting to be healed. God gives you time for healing. Take the time to be healed. God isn't in a hurry, ever, when it comes to your salvation, and neither should you be. And by salvation I am not just talking about after you die. I am talking about salvation today, in this earth and this life. God wants to bring the blessings of salvation to you now and not yet. Be faithful in your going and in your waiting.

So, what in the world does any of this circumcision story have to do with Nora, who is, after all, a girl? Ah, I wondered when you would ask me that.

(SLIDE-Colossians 2:11-12) In Christ we are all, male and female, circumcised not with human hands but by Christ's death on the Cross. Jesus Christ cuts off our sin and leaves us free to be ruled not by flesh but by the Spirit of God. We die with Christ and we are raised with Christ. That is what circumcision means for followers of Christ.

(SLIDE-Heidelberg #74) And that is what this story has to do with Nora.

Circumcision, we believe, was replaced by baptism. Baptism is a 'sign of the covenant' that God makes with each of us, to bring us safely home. And it is in baptism that we see God's saving action, as Nora is 'incorporated into the Christian church.' Now, baptism does not save Nora. Jesus's death saves Nora.

But, baptism is the sign and seal that Jesus died for Nora, and that she is now and forever shall be marked as a child of God. The mark is not performed with a flint knife, but rather with the mark of the cross which the baptismal waters leave on her tiny forehead.

(SLIDE-Joshua 5:9) The sign of baptism is a sign that, like circumcision, God has rolled away the reproach of Egypt. The people who mock us for believing in God, who say that there is no God, who say that God is not able to bless us as we say, they will be shown otherwise. Today we showed Satan and the powers of evil, this one belongs to God. She will not feel shame in following God in her life; she will rather know joy in the Lord.

So, today this is not Hope Church. This is Gilgal. This is the place where forever Nora will be able to tell people, I was set free from the tyranny of sin and shame to live in the land of blessings forevermore. This, of course, does not mean that her life will be without trouble or human concerns. But it does mean that God will carry her safely through the rivers of her troubles and deliver her safely onto the land. I believe it, that today we are in Nora's Gilgal, and yours too.

(SLIDE-Col. 2:15) I believe it because this is a place which celebrates that God has 'disarmed the powers and authorities' and in a public spectacle turned an

instrument of torture into a symbol of triumph. Baptism is a sign of Jesus's triumph for Nora and all who are baptized into Christ. Baptism is a sign of Christ's triumph over 'the powers and authorities'; over our sin and over death itself, and the amazing act we did today is a sign that Nora is a one of the Pilgrim Community of Hope and God's family forever.

(SLIDE-Jos. 5:11-12) And this sign is the invitation to the Great Banquet. The people, healed from circumcision, now gather around the Passover feast to remember God's faithfulness in the past, to celebrate God provision of the produce of the Land of Canaan, and to experience the hope of the tomorrow God has planned for them. The miracle of manna ended that day, because now they could raise and harvest the produce of the Promised Land themselves and know that it was all from God. So it is for each of us. What we have, our blessings of shelter and food are from God; these are our produce of the land of Canaan.

(SLIDE) Remember then, God prepares each of us to enter the land through covenant-confirming baptism, giving us the sign that we are all invited; and the banquet to which we are invited contains all of the provision we need in the land to which God is bringing us.

God is in the saving business. God is in the business of carrying Nora through the waters and preparing a table for her in the presence of her enemies, surrounding her with the produce of Canaan with which she is blessed today and forever in the land, a land she will call home.