

Baptismal Customary



ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Baptismal Belonging and Vocation: Thoughts for Those Who Desire the Sacrament of Baptism

Instructions and Resources

Baptismal identity is central to how Episcopalians see our place and purpose in the world. Every human being is created in the image and likeness of God and is loved beyond imagining. And every human being has been given gifts needed for the healing of the world. Being baptized is accepting both that sense of belonging and that sense of call—or vocation—to make the world a better place.

To be baptized is a lifelong process, not just something to prepare for and then you're done. It's about ongoing relationships. If you're considering asking the people of St. John's to baptize your child or yourself, then this means *you are asking us to be an integral part of your or your child's life*. It's a promise we take seriously. During the baptism, we as your faith community make this pledge:

"Will you who witness these vows do all in your power to support this person in his/her life in Christ?"

To which we all say, "We will."

In order for us to fulfill the promise you're asking us to make, you're promising to be an active part of our church community. There are many ways to do this. Below, you will find some ideas for participation in the community to connect to the baptismal promises you make for your child or for yourself.

The primary place children learn about the life of faith is in the home. So, having your child baptized is as much about your faith practices as it is theirs. Choosing to be baptized as an adult is also about the practices you keep in your home. Your children will learn to live as they see you live, and those with whom you live will learn what is important.

Therefore, what follows are some thoughts on each of the baptismal vows. Here you'll see questions for your own reflection as well as practical ideas about how to deepen and strengthen your inner spirituality and your participation in liturgy, and how you can use your gifts for the healing of the world. Some of these ideas will fit better at some times in your life while others will fit better in other times.

Think of these suggestions as ways to strengthen the quality of your relationships. In developing lifelong faith practices (or "holy habits" as some call them), you'll find them useful to you in times of sorrow or testing. You'll find they become the lens through which you can become attentive to and grateful for the Mystery we call God at work in our hearts and in our world.

For details and resources on the Episcopal Church, visit <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/>.

The Baptismal Vows

The first three questions in the baptismal vows, patterned on the Apostles' Creed,* are asked by the liturgy's celebrant to those being baptized about their belief in each person of the Trinity (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit) along with a concise understanding of each person's nature (for a fuller description of the Trinity as established by the church in 325 in Nicaea, see the Nicene Creed at <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/what-we-believe/creeds/>).

Do you believe in God the Father?

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God?

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit?

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

The vows then move to five questions regarding how we as Christians are called to live out our faith: with firm commitment and reliance on God's help.

Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in the prayers?

I will, with God's help.

Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

I will, with God's help.

Will you proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ?

I will, with God's help.

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

I will, with God's help.

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being?

I will, with God's help.

*Creeds are statements of our basic beliefs about God. The term comes from the Latin *credo*, meaning “I believe.” While we will always have questions about God, the church, and our own faith, we have two foundational creeds that we use during worship: the Apostles’ Creed used at baptism and daily worship, and the Nicene Creed used at Communion. In reciting and affirming these creeds, we join Christians across the world and throughout the ages in affirming our faith in the one God who created us, redeemed us, and sanctifies us.

Understanding What These Vows Mean

“Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching . . . ?”

Since God gave us minds for thinking, part of the Christian life is to study Scripture, tradition, and reason (the hallmarks of how Episcopalians make decisions), giving each equal weight. What about your patterns of continuing “in the apostles’ teaching” will your child or others learn by watching you? When your children or peers come to you with questions (and they will!) about God, faith, prayer, Jesus, death, and so on, will you have thought through these questions for yourself? What do you think about forgiveness? Healing? Jesus? Other religions? Church? Death?

Here are some practical ways to “continue in the apostles’ teaching”:

- *Attend church.* Join us for Sunday morning worship and other special services during the year. Attend a service at the Episcopal Cathedral of St. Paul (it’s like the “mothership” for Episcopalians in Boston in the way that Canterbury Cathedral is for Anglicans all over the world).
- *Engage in Scripture and prayer.* In church, we hear readings from Scripture that are then set in context by the preacher. You can participate in these prayers, turning your heart to gratitude and to collaborating with God to make the world a better place.
- *Get a Bible.* The Episcopal Church recommends the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVue), although there are multiple Bible translations available for different needs or preferences (e.g., updated language or paraphrased). There are also many children and young adult Bibles available.

“Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship . . . ?”

Being a Christian means patterning your life after Christ who surrounded himself with a community of people to share life and work for a world in which all can live in dignity and love (what he called the “kingdom of God”). What will your children learn from you about what it means to be a vital part of the web of relationships that is church? What will they learn from you about working together for the common good? What will they learn from you about sharing time, laughter, and service with church friends?

Here are some practical ways to “continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship”:

- *Be a part of Sunday morning leadership.* Read the Scripture lessons, greet people, bear the chalice, usher, serve on the altar guild, bake Communion bread, sing, play an instrument, etc.
- *Provide hospitality at coffee hour.*
- *Pledge money* to the church budget and talk about it with your children.
- *Facilitate the formation of adult Christian faith* by leading book studies, prayer groups, meditation, and so on.
- *Minister to others.* Bring meals to those who are ill, visit the homebound, befriend residents at retirement homes, celebrate joys, knit a prayer shawl, mourn losses (e.g., write a card, attend a funeral).
- *Join a team or committee.* Serve on the Vestry, the finance or welcoming committee, the altar or flower guild, the property team, the communications team, etc.
- *Work around the church.* Shovel snow, work in the garden, decorate the church for special services, etc.

“Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, through the breaking of bread . . . ?”

Come to church! Feel the collective heartbeat. Listen to all the voices singing in harmony. Breathe in God’s presence. Bring your whole, authentic self. Be fed and be sent. What will your children learn from you about the importance of the Eucharist to you? The music? The prayers? How will you make church attendance fit into the regular rhythm of your week? How will you invite your children into full participation in the liturgy?

In addition to fully engaging in the service yourself, here are some thoughts for how to fully engage children in worship:

- Teach them to respect the experience of the other worshipers.
- Teach them the important phrases such as “The Lord be with you,” “I will with God’s help,” and “Amen.”
- Teach them to stand to sing, to turn to face the Gospel reader, to bow when the cross or the Gospel book comes by.
- Teach them to hold out their hands for bread as if receiving a gift (which they are!).
- Encourage them to invite their friends to church.
- Prepare them for worship by asking questions such as, “I wonder what the Jesus story will be today?” or “I wonder what songs we’ll sing?”
- Ask them about their experience: “What was the best part of church for you today?” or “Who were you happiest to see today?”
- Encourage them to be readers, greeters, ushers, singers, and acolytes.

“Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, through the breaking of bread and the prayers?”

Feeling connected to the presence of God is about attentiveness and awareness, which is how we think about prayer. Through prayer, we invite the love and light of God to surround a person or a situation. Through prayer, we offer ourselves to be sent out to be Christ's hands and feet in the world. There are many, many ways to be in prayer.

What are your feelings about prayer? Do you pray? When? How? Why? What will your child learn about prayer by watching you? Here are some tools to help you expand and deepen your experience of prayer:

- Know your way around the Book of Common Prayer
- Spend time with them just sitting in silence (it's easier if you time it, starting with less than a minute and then increasing over time; children need silence spaces as much as adults do!)
- Bless them as you drop them off for daycare or school
- Pray before meals
- Pray before bed
- Teach them to be still and silent as a way of praying (prayer doesn't always have to use words)
- Teach them to praise God
- Sing church songs at home
- Light a candle or position your hands in a certain way for prayer or quiet times
- Celebrate the church year by observing the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost

"Will you persevere in resisting evil . . . ?"

There is evil in this world. Although many or even most of us don't believe in a single entity, such as Satan, that creates evil, the reality is that our collective action and inaction creates space where the good of some triumphs over the good of all. There is violence, greed, and global warming. There are interlocking systems of oppression we benefit from because of our privilege of race, class, gender expression, education, sexual orientation, and so on. To be a Christian is to stand clearly and strongly against evil and to spend our lives working for love, justice, and peace.

What will your children learn from you by watching how you about stand up against racism? Poverty? Violence? Chasing after wealth? Harming the planet?

- You can encourage conversation about what brings holiness and what brings brokenness in this world.
- You can become involved with groups at St. John's who are working to slow climate change, learning about white privilege, or standing against gun violence.
- One practical task we ask some St. John's folks to do is to attend a Safe Church training event where we learn about child sexual predators and how to create environments where predators are unable to function.

"Will you persevere in resisting evil, and whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?"

Every one of us makes mistakes. We do things or leave things undone, resulting in broken relationships with ourselves, others, and the earth. This baptismal promise reminds us to live a

reflective life, to pay attention to the effects of our actions, and if possible amend the wrongs we have done and strive to do better.

Being aware of our capacity for sin (a word that simply means “missing the mark” of who we would like to be in the world), Episcopalians take confession very seriously. So seriously, in fact, that at almost every worship experience, we offer the opportunity as a large group to confess our sins and hear the words of forgiveness (absolution).

What will your child learn by watching you live a reflective life? What will your peers learn by watching you live a reflective life? Do they watch you look over your shoulder at the effect your actions have on your relationships? On the earth? Those who have hurt you? Those you don't like? What will they learn from watching how you admit your mistakes? Try to mend what has been broken? Forgive those who have hurt you? Forgive yourself? Try to be better in the future? Work for the healing of the earth?

- Talk to your children/others about when you make mistakes.
- Teach your children language about how to forgive and accept forgiveness. Practice forgiving and accepting forgiveness.

“Will you proclaim, word, and example the good news of God in Christ?”

The world has plenty of cynics. As people believing in the good news of the gospel, however, we are bearers of hope. We cling to the notion that things can be better. This hope comes to us in the story of Jesus the Christ, who was persecuted, murdered by the state, buried in a tomb, and rose again.

What will your child or your peers learn from you about hope? About Jesus' vision for a world where all have food, safety, dignity, and love? What will they learn from you about the power of a life patterned after Jesus that has the power to heal what is broken, include what has been cast out, inspire the defeated?

- Engage in conversation about what can make the world better or about how you/they might bring some hope to a friend who is angry or in despair.
- As age appropriate, pay attention to the news and imagine ways to be hopeful in the real situations facing our communities.

“Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? Will you strive for justice and peace and respect the dignity of every human being?”

Every single person is a child of God and worthy of dignity and respect: *every single person without exception*. As Christians, we strive to love everyone as God loves everyone, regardless of what they have done or left undone.

What will your child or your peers learn from you about the dignity of every human being? Will they see you serving others? Sharing your time and talent? Standing up against injustice in day-to-day relationships, in unkindness anywhere? Will they see you participating in the gift of democracy to make sure the poor are cared for and the common good served? To what degree will they be aware that the privileges they were born into (class, race, public schools, democratic country, etc.)

are not shared by most of the world or even most of our country? (One in four children in Massachusetts live in poverty!)

Here are some ways to fold justice and service into your life so that your children grow up or you know that being baptized means you work to make the world a better place:

- Serve at the Grace Center or at the Open Door food pantry
- Commit one hour a month to assemble brown bag sandwich lunches for Action Inc.
- Work two-hour shifts at St. John's Regal Rummage or Thrift Shop, which serve as resources to our community
- Offer Communion once per month to those in special circumstances
- Maintain a Kiva microloan account (<https://www.kiva.org/>)
- Model visiting or writing to your elected representatives on behalf of those in need or to stand against violence and exploitation
- Model to them the importance of your voice by voting!
- On each anniversary of their/your baptism, spend time doing something good to make the world a better place
- Watch age-appropriate movies about children whose lives are different from theirs and then discuss the films with your children
- Give generously to charitable causes and encourage your children from an early age to follow your example

Being baptized is all about relationship—relationship with God, the self, the church, the world. This document is our way of fleshing out how seriously we take the promises made at baptism. It is far more than what happens in the actual ceremony; it is a commitment to pattern your life after Christ and, through your example, help your children to pattern their lives after Christ.

What to Do to Have Yourself or Your Child Baptized

Episcopalians strive not for conformity but for a sense of humility, where we are able to dine at the Holy Table together, loved equally by God. For us, loving one another well is far more important than having to agree on everything.

By now, you have caught on that being baptized into the Christian faith and life is mostly about how you for yourself or as a parent or godparent engage the baptismal promises in your own life. Others, including your children, will learn by watching you.

Some of us at St. John's feel that baptism is so important that there should be some requirements of the parents and godparents before baptism. This would reclaim some of the earliest practices from the first two hundred years after Jesus. At that time, those preparing for baptism went through a lengthy and thorough process of aligning their lives with Christ's teaching before they were baptized. *The pattern here is first believing/vocation and then belonging/baptism.*

Most of us, however, are already overwhelmed by the pace of our lives that to take on more tasks and requirements before baptism is not only off-putting but it opposes the value we place on welcoming everyone to our church. Some of us therefore don't think there should be any requirements before or after baptism. *In this case, the pattern is first belonging/baptism and then believing/vocation.*

In true Episcopalian style, St. John's walks the middle way. What follows, therefore, are *suggestions* for you to prepare your spiritual life before the baptism of your child or godchild. Some of you will welcome the opportunity to engage in these ideas and practices before baptism. Others will fold them in as time goes on. Regardless, patterning your lives after Christ is a lifelong process. It is both about your inner journey with the Mystery, as well as your role in the community's journey as followers of Jesus. Here are some ideas:

- *Attend church* for at least two months, perhaps sampling our different worship opportunities.
- *Serve regularly* in some Sunday morning capacity (e.g., offer to be on a coffee hour team).
- *Submit a pledge card* to support St. John's budget. Although generosity is valued, the amount on the card is less important to us than the commitment to sharing in the ministry of the church.
- *Expand and deepen your prayer life* by experimenting with different forms of prayer.
- *Work to make the world a better place* through at least one of our outreach activities.

For ongoing faith formation after your baptism, visit <https://vts.edu/lifelong-learning/activate-baptism/>.

Q & A

Who can be baptized?

Anyone who seeks God and is drawn to Jesus Christ is welcome to receive the sacrament of Holy Baptism. God's invitation extends to people of all ages and from every kind of background.

Can small children be baptized?

Yes, of course. The celebration of an infant's baptism is a joyous occasion for that child and for the family, as well as for the family-in-Christ, the church. Baptism celebrates God's love for us and how God calls each of us to a special and personal relationship.

Must we be active members or regular givers?

No. We welcome everyone. Period. Since part of what baptism conveys is membership in the body of Christ, the church, we welcome you to participate in our worship and community life—before, during, and after baptism.

What happens if we decide to postpone the baptism?

Nothing. Baptism is appropriate at any age or at any time.

What if I don't know if I was ever baptized?

No problem; we've got that covered. Although we consider baptism an unrepeatable event, we also have the ability to perform what is called a "conditional baptism" in circumstances like these.

I was baptized elsewhere. Do I need to be baptized again?

No. Baptism is baptism. You could have been baptized in the Roman Catholic Church, another denomination, or down by the riverside. All that matters is that it involved water and an invocation of the Triune God. These are all recognized by the Episcopal Church and the worldwide Anglican Communion.

When are baptisms offered?

The calendar of the Christian church has four feast days on which baptisms are especially appropriate. They are:

- The Feast of the Baptism of our Lord (January)
- The Great Vigil of Easter (the day before Easter Sunday)
- The Day of Pentecost (fifty days after Easter Sunday)
- All Saints' Sunday (first Sunday in November)

We encourage baptisms on these joyous occasions. If circumstances necessitate a different date, we will try to accommodate your need.

Who can be godparents/sponsors?

Every candidate for baptism is accompanied in their faith journey by at least one sponsor (for adults) or godparent (for minor children). The commitment of the sponsor is to support the candidate in the Christian faith and life. One sponsor must be a Christian, preferably an Episcopalian. Anyone else can serve in this role, including persons from other faith traditions or no faith tradition—as long as the individual is sincere in promising to support the candidate's spiritual growth as a Christian. Today, any number of sponsors is considered appropriate.

What are the expectations of the church after baptism?

Because baptism is a rite of initiation and welcome, the church yearns for the newly baptized to have an authentic relationship with God and the Christian assembly. A mark of this relationship will be regular participation in the life of this parish. We invite candidates for baptism to take seriously this aspect of the Christian life, expressing a sincere commitment to “continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers.”

How much does baptism cost?

There is no charge for this or any other sacramental rite. As a sign of God's love freely bestowed upon all people, baptism come without a price tag. Many people, however, feel called to make a monetary donation in thanksgiving for a baptism. We remind you that the biblical standard for giving to the church is a tithe (10 percent of your earnings). If you are not currently giving at this level, we encourage you to prayerfully reconsider. Cost, however, must never be a barrier to providing a joyful baptism.

How do I schedule a baptism?

When you're ready to commit to a specific date, the process is quite simple. Please contact a member of our staff (contact information is listed on the first page of this document) to begin your inquiry—or better yet, come to church, worship with us, and become a part of our community!

Adapted from St. Mary's Episcopal Church, St. Paul, MN