

Branded for Life

Scripture: Genesis 17:9-14, Colossians 2:9-12

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People of God: When you live in Alberta, as I did for nearly seven years, you can't but help but become aware of the Calgary Stampede. This famous rodeo displays some of the skills that were at one time needed in ranching and still are used to this day. From roping a calf to precision riding, the tasks and skills of being a cowboy are displayed--except for one. To the best of my knowledge, branding is not shown in a rodeo.

Branding was a very important means to identifying cattle, especially in the days of the open range. When cattle were stolen, the mark of the brand was the only legal way to identify ownership. While branding is being replaced with tagging, the idea is still the same: to prove ownership and provide identification.

Baptism is a type of branding. Sure there are many differences between the branding of animals and the baptism of people, yet there are many similarities as well. As a rancher brands his cattle as a means of identification and proving ownership, so the Lord God marks his people through baptism as a means of identification and proving ownership.

And so you could say that Peyton has been branded this morning. He has been marked. Now it is true that there is no physical feature that you can point to show this marking. When cattle are branded, there is a physical mark. It is clearly seen. That's not the case with the marking of baptism. The water, which is used, leaves no permanent mark. You can't see it on Peyton anymore. Still, he has been marked.

Now in the OT, there was a physical marking. When God first established his covenant with Abraham, circumcision was made a sign and seal of that covenant. We read about that in our scripture reading from Genesis. In that chapter, God laid out his promises of the covenant. At that time, God required that every male in the household of Abraham be

circumcised. This became a lasting ordinance for the people of God. Every male on the eighth day was circumcised. God's people were marked. This marking separated the people of God from the surrounding nations. This mark identified who belonged to the covenant. This mark pointed to God's claim on their lives that He will be their God, and they will be his people.

But with the coming of Christ, this mark of the covenant changed. It is no longer the physical mark of circumcision. Instead, it is baptism. Baptism is now the mark that identifies us as members of the covenant.

But baptism leaves no permanent mark. But that does not mean the branding of baptism is no less real and permanent than the branding of circumcision. Baptism marks us for life. But because it is more hidden, we need to be reminded of our marking. Whenever we witness the sacrament of baptism, as did again this morning, we are reminded of our own baptism.

The imagery of being branded can help us keep straight the main actor in baptism. Branding is something done to the animal. Of course, the animal needs to be there. But it is the rancher who brands the animal and claims it as his own. In the same way, in baptism God is the main actor. Yes, there needs to be the infant or the adult being baptized, but baptism is something done to a person.

In this way, baptism is very different than the Lord's Supper. In the Lord's Supper, we take, we eat, we drink. But in baptism, we do not take the water and baptize ourselves. Instead, the water is administered to the person. In baptism, it is God who lays his claim upon the person saying: I am your God and you are my child.

Baptism, therefore, marks us. But what does this mark of the covenant do? How does it identify us as belonging to God? Well, baptism points out what God has done for in Christ. Remember that the sacraments are God's visual aids to reinforce the preaching of the gospel. The gospel points us to the crucified Lord. The sacraments reinforce this point.

But how does baptism point us to Christ? Well, there are a number of images that Scripture uses to convey the message of baptism. One of those images is that of cleansing.

Cleansing is a good image for baptism. Baptism involves water. We use water every day to clean ourselves, to wash away the dirt, the grime, and the sweat of a hard day's work. With water, we wash the dishes and our clothes. Water is used in baptism, as a symbol of the spiritual washing that everyone needs. We confess that we are born sinners. We have been stained with the original sin of Adam and Eve and stand condemned before the Lord. We need to be cleaned. We can't do it ourselves. Someone else must wash us. Baptism points out that cleansing is possible. It is possible by the blood of Christ. In

Christ our sins are washed away.

There is another image used in Scripture to describe baptism. It is to see baptism as our burial and resurrection with Christ. We read about that in Romans 6:4

We were therefore buried with Christ through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

Baptism in this verse is connected with the death and resurrection of Christ. Just as Christ was buried, so we too were buried with him in baptism. Our old sinful nature was put to death. As Christ arose from the dead, so we too are given new life.

Now we must remember that baptism is just a sign of these things. It is a sign of cleansing, but baptism in and of itself does not cleanse of our sins. Only Christ can do that. Neither does baptism cause the new life that comes with being buried and raised with Christ. No, that is only the result of the working of the Holy Spirit. Baptism just points to these things. It is not the cause. We can have no magical view of baptism.

On the other hand, we cannot neglect or reject baptism because it is merely a sign. It is God's sign. It is God's way of reinforcing the preaching of the Word. It is God's mark of identification. It is God's way of making his claim upon us. As a result, we cannot afford to reject it. We cannot simply pass it by and think nothing of it. No. God has established his covenant. He has given his sign and seal for the covenant. In the OT, the sign and seal was circumcision. Now, it is baptism. It cannot be rejected.

Nor should it be ignored. Perhaps that is the great danger we face. Baptism is something we almost take for granted. After all, we witness baptism on a regular basis—it's easy to get the attitude: Here, we go again. But let's not take baptism for granted. It should affect you right now.

After all, you have been branded by God. That branding stays with us. It does not disappear. Rather, it has on-going significance in our lives. Baptism is never a once-for-all event; it's not something that happened to us in the past. Instead, we have been branded for life. But what really does that mean?

Baptism means we have been set apart from the world. The community to which we belong is the community of believers. This is where we are called to be. In the midst of the body of Christ, serving our God. Not out in the world, serving its idols. Because God claims us. We are his. As the opening of the catechism puts it: I am not my own, but belong body and soul, in life and in death, to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. Baptism acts as a sign of this ownership. Let us rejoice in that.

Let us rejoice in the many blessings we have for being part of the covenant community. Children can be taught from the earliest moments who God is and what God has done for them. What a blessing it is to be part of the church whose programs seek to mold and direct children, youth and adults to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

Baptism reminds us of the community to which we belong. It also reminds us of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. As I said a few minutes ago, baptism points us to the cleansing of our sins. It points us to our union with Christ. What an encouragement this ought to be for us. Salvation is not dependent upon what we have done. Salvation is dependent on the work of Christ. Baptism reminds us of this.

Baptism also calls us to live according to the mark. We have been branded as God's people. Therefore, we must live as God's people. Those who have baptized in the name of the triune God are called to believe in this God. They are called to follow this God. Our baptism calls us to faithful obedience to our Lord.

This raises the difficult question concerning those who have received the mark of the covenant, but have rejected the One who marked them. God has claimed them as his own, but they have rejected this claim. Sometimes this is an active rejection, where a person makes it clear they do not believe in God and His word.

In many cases, this rejection is indirect. They won't deny that God exists or even that Scripture is God's word. But they live in such a way so as to ignore God. They reject the church, by their non-attendance. They live their lives according to how they want to live. In so doing, they reject their baptism. They go counter to the mark God has branded them with.

How do we view their baptism in such cases? Was it just an empty sign? Does it still mean anything? The answer is that baptism still continues to mean something, even for those who have rejected its meaning. Baptism is not an empty sign. But its meaning is not pleasant to hear.

Baptism for those who have rejected the church and the gospel becomes a means of branding them a traitor. That's putting it bluntly, but it underscores the urgency of the situation. They ought to be here. But they are not. They had the advantages of being part of the believing community, but they turned their backs on it. As a result, their baptism now marks them as traitors.

But that's not the end of the matter. Their baptism continues to call them to repentance. The claim of God still remains with them. God says: I will be your God and you will be my people. For those on the way-ward path, baptism calls them home. It calls them to leave their sin behind. It calls them

to return to their heavenly father. It calls them back to community of believers.

As a result, we have a special obligation to them—to call them back home, to say there is room for them in the family of believers. While some of their names may have already been erased from the books of the church, the church can never erase their baptism. Nor can those who were baptized erase what was done to them. Nor can they erase what they were taught in this church. As parents often say, “They know better.” They know the basics of the gospel. They know what the church is about. It’s a connection we can use, if we use it wisely. When it comes to evangelism, this is the first group we must seek to reach.

Baptism is ultimately a sign of God's grace and mercy. It claims us as God's covenant community. It directs us to what Christ has done for us. And that's good news. We can know that God cares for us. God protects us. God loves us.

People of God, today we have witnessed again baptism, a unique form of branding. Peyton have been marked for life. God has claimed him as his own. He will be called to live for him. That’s true for all those marked with the covenant.

But there may be some here this morning, who have not been baptized, who have not been branded by God. That doesn’t mean the promises of God are not for you. In faith, you too can accept the promises of God and receive the mark of the covenant. A mark that brands us for life. Amen.