Have Faith that God Wants You—1 Pet 1:3-9

[Reread passage.]

 In this life, inheritances are inherently perishable. Several of you may know a little something about the federal estate tax, which while it does not tax an inheritance, does tax the property of a deceased person—you see the difference, I trust. Some of you may have done everything you could to circumvent the estate tax, knowing just how perishable inheritances can be in this world.

 We do try to store up for ourselves treasure in this life, knowing well that moth and rust consume, knowing all along that thieves break in and steal. Then the stock market crashes—some of you may have some childhood memories of those years. In the fall of 1987, I was taking a high school economics class. I was charting the performance of two blue chip stocks. My graph was keeping within a fairly narrow band quite nicely right up until a certain day in October, when I had to add several pages vertically to chart the value of the stock. That would have been a depressing month to receive an inheritance in the form of stock.

 St. Peter is reminding us to stay focused on the imperishable, undefiled, and unfading inheritance we have in Christ Jesus. Christ instructed his followers to store up for themselves treasure in heaven; let us also store up Christ in ourselves. We do this through hearing and receiving the Word in the power of the Spirit.

We store up Christ in ourselves through receiving the Word preached and the Word enacted through the Sacraments.

 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, indeed, for it has pleased Him to bless us with the Sacraments, and we are preparing this morning to witness the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. St. Peter speaks of the new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. For his part, St. Paul reminds us, first of all, that in baptism we are being baptized into Christ’s death so that we may be raised to walk in newness of life; secondly, if we have been united with Christ in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his (Rom 6:5).

 With Martha there outside Bethany, we may initially think that these words are referring to an event at the end of the age, distant, remote, far away from us and our daily lives, our daily concerns, our daily worries: all the things we bring along with us into this sanctuary this morning, all the things we somehow hope God may transform for us, today, here in our worship.

 Our Presbyterian worship is good at directing our minds and hearts toward God, but it is not always so good at impressing upon us the reality of God’s nearness. For the great majority of the history of the Church, that nearness was impressed upon the faithful through the Sacraments, God’s Word enacted upon and enacted within their lives with tangible immediacy.

In Holy Baptism, through signs God has chosen, we witness God’s immediacy, God’s nearness. God is as near as this Word you now hear, near as this water that shall soon be poured out into this font. God is as near as the hand that shall pour the water upon Evan’s head, as near as the hand that will bless Evan afterwards. It’ll look like Sue’s hand, but beloved, God is using this Word, this water, and that hand to speak to you, to come to you, to remind and assure you that God is near and not far. His love and mercy are ever-present. By the hands He holds out to you—the Sacraments, His Word—He is leading you into that inheritance of which St. Peter speaks: imperishable, undefiled, and unfading. God invites us to receive the Sacraments with grateful confidence. God gives us the Sacraments in order to build us up in loving confidence.

 We can be confident that God is already at work in Evan’s young life. We are confident that it was God who called Evan into being, which is one especially agonizing part of what makes abortion such a sorrowful matter. It may even be that God is speaking to Evan in ways you and I cannot perceive, can no longer perceive, except through faith, the faith that God wants Evan for one of His own, faith that the Holy Spirit embraces Evan, and all of us.

 Baptism, beloved, is a continuation of the work of the Holy Spirit. We have faith that the Holy Spirit is at work in the lives of believers, in the lives of those God is calling into belief.

We have faith that the Holy Spirit is at work in the lives of believing families, and families that God is calling into belief. We have faith that the Holy Spirit is at work in the life of every congregation of the Church, and indeed, that the Holy Spirit is at work in and through the Church. In Baptism, God reminds us that the Holy Spirit both creates faith and continually confirms faith in us. Continually, the Holy Spirit builds us up in faith, transforming us into the People God means for us to be in Christ, by the Spirit. The world has no use for us! The world needs us more than it can ever know. God has a wonderful use for us!

 Now our Baptist brothers and sisters have a perpetual bone to pick with us about our baptizing of infants, who are unable to make a public profession of faith, who have not been allowed to discern and decide for themselves, those whose will and wishes have not been consulted prior to this thing we do, today, do to Evan, do for him and on his behalf. Some may even say that nowhere in Scripture are we commanded to baptize infants; therefore, infant baptism is not scriptural.

 Yet it is St. Peter himself who tells the crowds gathered that day of Pentecost, those crowds asking what they needed to do in response to the convicting Word Peter had just spoken to them, it is St. Peter himself who tells them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away,

everyone whom the Lord our God calls to Him” (Ac 2:38-39). When Peter says to them, “be baptized every one of you,” is he excluding infants? When he says that “the promise is for you [and] for your children,” does he only mean children old enough to make their own decision? Beloved, I was baptized as an adult, as was Devon. Adult baptism, sisters and brothers, is like a stage along the way of sanctification. Devon and I pray for that sanctification for both our sons. She and I want them to be within the covenant family, too, now, for we have faith that God wants them. Think, then, of the baptism of infants as a starting point on the way of their sanctification, that renewal and consecration that God is bringing about in us all. And what better starting point than baptism could there be for that renewal and consecration, that way of sanctification?!

 When I say that, through Holy Baptism, we affirm the continuation of the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church, in her congregations, in families and in persons, I am saying that we acknowledge that God is forming for Himself a faithful people, a holy people, consecrated to His service—men and women, old and young, adolescents and, yes, even infants. Baptism sets us apart for this service, to be nurtured within the Body of Christ, raised among a servant people. Even before we were able to discern, long before we were able to decide, God had chosen us in Christ through the Spirit;

beloved, it is only through the Spirit fashioning faith in us that we are then able to decide, to say yes. Apart from the Spirit, no one can claim Christ is Lord.

 Part of what we do today, then, is acknowledge that God has already been at work on Evan’s behalf, and on the behalf of all of us who have been baptized. If you have not yet received the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, if you have not yet been born again of water and the Spirit, my prayer is that you will discover the Spirit speaking to you today, urging you to yearn for this water of God’s blessing. If you have children who have not yet been baptized, my prayer for you is that you will realize in an even more powerful way that God is at work in their lives already, and that, realizing this, you will yearn that they receive the Sacrament of Holy Baptism.

 Together, as the Church and as a congregation of the Church, let us affirm the new birth, the living hope through the resurrection that we have in Jesus Christ, who calls us, his disciples, to go and make disciples, baptizing them. You know, our son Nicholas is already a disciple; and we are all of us helping to show him a life of discipleship. You know, God is calling Evan to be a disciple even now, and we see a clear, beautiful image of discipleship already in him: how utterly dependent he is upon our love, our care, our provision, our guidance: beloved, so are we entirely dependent upon God.

 I trust that it is no secret to you that we need each other as we walk along the way of faith. We can encounter God, brothers and sisters, through one another, through our faithful lives, shared generously—dare I say faithfully?—with one another. I very much need your faith to help my faith. My prayer is that God may use my faith to help your faith. Faith, that gift of the Holy Spirit, builds us up together in love, in Christ.

 Anyone can go through a long stretch when faith feels as though it has evaporated: a dry summer of the soul. It is often through the faith of those around us—through our encountering God through them—that we are able to carry on, hopeful that faith will arise in our own lives once more. In God’s Word—that soil in which we grow—through the Sacraments that He has instituted—that water that helps us to be resilient and strong—and through His presence in our lives—that sunlight, warming us through—God promises to see us through, not merely one or five or fifty, but all of us in Christ.

 Our Reformed faith speaks of Baptism as a sign and a seal. As a sign, we may be confident of God’s nearness among us—today and always—through Baptism, as many of us have been baptized. We may also have every confidence that God is claiming, forgiving, and transforming Evan this day: Baptism is God’s seal, saying, “You have my Word on it; you have my Word on him; you have my Word in you. Be my Word, then, for one another, and for all your neighbors.” Baptism is God’s promise that we are alive in Christ, empowered by the Spirit, and loved eternally by the Father, as near to us as this water, as near to us as bread and juice, as near to us as these words, as near to us as our very breath.

 Rejoice, therefore, with that indescribable and glorious joy that St. Peter mentions, for we witness, testify and affirm this day, in an immediate and sacred way, that as many of us as have been baptized into Christ Jesus “are receiving the outcome of [our] faith, the salvation of [our] souls.”

Now, to the One who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever.