

LENT: A WATER JOURNEY
1 Lent, Year B – March 1, 2009
Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close – Grace Church, Haddonfield, NJ

Here we are again, in the great season of Lent. It's a time meant to help us prepare for the celebration of Easter. Lent is a period of self-examination, personal reflection ... a time to ask ourselves what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ ... and to see how well we follow the Way of Jesus. The Way of Christ is the Way of the Cross. We are invited to participate in God's salvation of the world through Jesus Christ ... to believe and repent. The purpose of Lent is to help us renew our Baptismal vows!

The theme of today's readings is water. The allusion to baptism is quite clear. When I do baptismal instruction with people, I ask them what they do with water. The answers are washing, or cleansing, and drinking. The meaning in Baptism is clear ... water cleans us and is essential to life. I also ask them what happens if we stay under water too long ... we drown, or die. Baptism holds this double meaning for water ... life and death. In our baptisms we participate in the death of Jesus and find the life that God intends for us!

The readings today help to clarify this meaning. In them, they talk about how God establishes a covenant with us ... and they speak to both life and death. Genesis tells us about the end of Noah's story. God used the floods to cleanse the earth, to wipe out humanity. Only Noah and his family survived. But in doing so, God makes a covenant with ALL the people, not just a select few, to never completely destroy humanity with a flood.

Have you ever seen how devastating a flood can be? My hometown, Elmira, New York, has witnessed the destruction of floods. The last great one I remember was when a hurricane roared up through in 1972. The city was demolished. I remember driving through and seeking the watermarks from the Chemung River reaching up and above the second story windows. The other thing I remember is the mud that stood knee deep in the homes and businesses. Elmira never really recovered from that flood. The reality of the flood is that there is little we can do to stop it. We can build dams and levees, but the sheer force of the water overwhelms.

After the great flood in the Bible, God says to Noah ... no more great floods to destroy all life. God makes a covenant with God ... you will be my people and I will not destroy you. God's ultimate purpose is not to destroy us, but to redeem us! The rainbow becomes a symbol of that promise. The water that brings death is replaced by the promise of life.

In the reading from Peter, we have what many scholars consider an early baptismal hymn used in liturgy. The water of baptism is understood here to be the way to enter into relationship with Jesus Christ. Water now becomes the way to be with Christ and in Christ, the share in his promises, to share in his life, and to share in the promise of new life! Baptism is the beginning of our journey in life, not an ending. It is not magic to protect us from suffering and problems. It is not magic that will guarantee us a place in heaven ... it is a promise that we share in the very essence of Jesus and thereby share in his Resurrection!

Water has the ability to bring us into relationship. For me, I remember growing up and building a boat with my father. We lived in the Finger Lake region of New York State. I remember the wooden inboard/outboard runabout we built for Lake Otisco. Working on that boat brought me closer to my father. I learned how to do some of the crafts work that he was so adept at ... I

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remember when we took the boat out on the lake for it's first maiden cruise, and the thrill of being able to steer the boat myself! But more important, it was about a relationship, of time and work together with my father.

It's the same with baptism. The water of baptism brings us into a relationship with God, into a new way of being. We are invited into the life of Jesus Christ, to work with him in bringing about the world's salvation ... to participate in the life-giving work that Jesus began. Water has the ability to bring us together in a powerful and new way ... it brings us into relationship!

Finally, today in Mark's Gospel, we are there for Jesus' baptism. We see that water is the way Jesus discerns his vocation, receives the Holy Spirit, and begins his ministry. It is also the point at which Jesus starts his journey towards the Cross, towards Jerusalem and the ultimate confrontation with the political and religious powers that have taken so many people away from the covenant and intent of God. Water is the beginning of the journey for Christ, just as Lent is our beginning of the journey towards Easter.

What we might ask ourselves is what needs to be washed away in us? Lent is the time to confront our sin. The reality is that all of us are sinners. It is in the fabric of our being. All of us have broken covenant with God. All of us fall short of what God intends. But it is God's plan to save us! We get lots of "do overs" or second chances with God ... more than we deserve and more than we could imagine.

Lent challenges us to take the first steps towards God and water shows us the how to let go and begin again. Water, the symbol of baptism, points us towards the promise of life that God holds out to us. No more do we have to fear the complete destruction of humanity by flood, although we will continue to witness floods in places around us, like New Orleans. But God promises life, and asks of us to be God's people. That's what covenant means.

In baptism, God washes away our sins, and gives us another chance. Just like Jesus, baptism is our beginning, our water journey, and our ability to move towards our crosses but with the promise of something at the end of our journey new life. Notice that baptism doesn't guarantee success, prosperity or a life free of suffering. Immediately after his baptism, Jesus is driven into the wilderness. He faces the wild beasts, those things that would tear us apart or devour us, and is tempted by Satan, those things that would threaten us to abandon our covenant with God.

Beware these television evangelists who preach a Gospel of Money and Prosperity! That is not what Jesus says to us! What we are promised is life, of the presence of God, of angels to attend us in the midst of our temptations and trials, and ultimately, of new life ... the life that comes after the Cross ... Resurrection. We all will have to go into our wildernesses, but there is hope that God is with us and that we will come out on the other side!

So what does Lent call of us now? Years ago friends of ours invited us to a celebration in Naples, Florida. Herb had recovered from life threatening cancer, and he and his wife Joan invited us to be part of a family and friend gathering at the Ritz Carlton! It was a great time.

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Sean must have been about 6 or 7, and I decided to take him sailing in the Gulf of Mexico. We took the sunfish off the beach, downed our life jackets and headed off into the warm green waters.

Most of you know I like hats, and I was wearing one as we sailed off shore. A gust blew it off and I turned, trying to snatch it from the water ... but I forgot to let go of the rope and let the sail luff. Disaster struck! The boat tipped over into the water. I jumped clear of the boat, but Sean clung desperately to the boat. It began to drag him under the water and he screamed, "I'm gonna die! I'm gonna die!" I saw what was happening, and shouted to Sean "Let go!" He shouted again, "I'm gonna die!" I shouted louder, "SEAN! LET GO!"

Sean let go, and the life jacket bobbed him on the surface, and he shouted in exclamation, joy and relief, "Oh!" There is so much that threatens to drown us. And we live in fear of drowning. Too many parts of the world and our lives threaten to drag us under. We cling desperately to things that will only tear us apart ... we must learn to let go! Lent is the time of year that we are challenged to let go of those things of the world that are in danger of drowning us. When we let go, we trust in God, and find that Jesus is the life jacket that saves our life!

The wild beasts surround and snap at us. We have to let go ... of anger, despair, depression, envy, jealousy, hate, arrogance, self-righteousness, pride, hurt and sorrow. We have to let the angels help us and embrace the Way of Christ. We have to face our crosses but know that God promises us a covenant of life. We have love, forgiveness, second chances, presence, hope and more in God ... Jesus is the promise of this!

So welcome to the Lenten journey. It's all about water. It's all about Jesus and us. So tell me, are we going to drown clinging desperately to those things that are life denying ... or are we going to let go and float with the help of Christ ... and live?