

Drowning

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St. Raphael's Episcopal Church, Lexington KY

Ps 25

1 Peter 3: 18-22

Gen. 9: 8-17

Mark 1: 9-13

Today's readings interweave two great themes: baptism and "the way of the Lord." We have Noah and the Flood, an Epistle on the sacrament of baptism, and Mark's account of the baptism of Jesus. The Psalm stays dry, as far as I can tell; but I think the Psalm is the key to them all.

"Show me your path," the Psalmist pleads to God. But look at what happens to Jesus. Once he is baptized, the heavens are torn open, and he is driven out into the wilderness. *This* is the way of the Lord? Get your feet wet with this God, and you will be driven out into the wilderness.

And what happens in the wilderness? Satan, Mark explains. Angels. Wild beasts. All the usual stuff, in short. All the difficult and complicated choices about what's right and what's wrong, what matters and what we can let go. So if at times you are weary and uncertain, if at times the life before you--and behind you, for that matter--feels like a barren landscape of tedium and drudgery and soul-crushing stress, well, maybe you are in the wilderness. Maybe you are waking up to the way of the Lord. If doing what you have always done, as you have always done it, as everyone else seems to do it if all of that feels increasingly impossible, maybe you too are in the wilderness, where the way of life-as-usual peters out in the trackless dust. Maybe there has to be a new way in your life, a way that God provides.

But there is comfort in these readings too. There is tremendous comfort. These voices come down to us from thousands of years ago--thousands of years ago--to say that life is like this. Life has always been like this. We are not dumb. We

are not incompetent. We are merely waking up to what life is truly about. Life is about looking around and recognizing that there is an alternative to what is wrong with our lives. We can in fact get off the path of life-as-usual and onto the way of the Lord. And God will indeed make that path clear and straight before us. These voices from the past reach out to us, insisting that there is indeed another way. There is indeed much more to our lives than the usual mix of exhausted frustration and unpaid bills.

But first, by golly, we begin by feeling lost and by feeling very alone. We begin by feeling threatened. We begin by finding ourselves in very deep water, away out over our heads. Baptism is supposed to feel like that, I think. Baptism is supposed to feel threatening. Baptism is supposed to be very dangerous, at least symbolically, because entrance into the wilderness always begins with water, with the Flood or with the Red Sea or with crossing and recrossing the Jordan River.

When we think "baptism" we usually think "babies." But I can't think about baptism without thinking about the time I was saved from drowning by the grace of God. I can't forget one summer afternoon late in August of 1971. I was at a picnic that the university organized for new dormitory staff. Some of the guys starting tossing people off the end of a pier into very deep water. After they left the pier, something inexplicable nudged me to wander out there all by myself. This is what happened.

Air

I saved a man from drowning, once. He stared
 At me, eyes wide and mouth open, hands spread
 To grasp the air and the summer light
 That held themselves aloof, just out of reach.
 I reached him but he pulled me under too,
 Out into the depths, out over my head,
 Tearing me free from the ladder I held.

Above, the surface shimmered blue and white
 In shifting silver hills and fractured plains;
 The ladder rippled out of reach and then
 Out of sight as well. I lunged and leapt
 And leapt again, the darkness folded in,

The socket of my shoulder screamed, and
 I had to bite my lips to hold them closed.
 The darkness seared my chest, swept up
 My neck, the back of my head,
 Black dancing leaden flames
 That pulled me back and down, until
 I knew that I no longer knew
 Where the light or the ladder awaited.

 But I leapt one more time,
 In deliberate futility, merely determined
 Not to die captive, motionless, as if
 I had surrendered to this most obvious consequence
 Of reaching out to one about to drown.

 Wood reached my right hand and held me:
 I rose from the waters and screamed.
 After that, I don't remember much.
 I did not hear the sirens, I did not
 See the people run, I do not remember
 How the planks of the pier felt against my back, nor
 How I was moved to the grit of the beach,
 Nor how nor when it was
 That he let go of my hand or
 Came out of the water himself.

 On campus later he bowed, in slight and
 Stiff and elegant formality, to
 Offer his most proper thanks. It was
 A most unlikely gesture for those days,
 But it had an almost liturgical grace.
 I met his propriety with mine,
 Also distant and untouching. And yet
 Our eyes held for one slow gripping fraction of a glance.
 He never spoke again to me, nor I
 To him, nor can I now recall his name.

In the name of Jesus Christ, in whose name we are baptized, by whose grace we
 are pulled from the waters of death--and driven out into the wilderness. . . .

Amen.