

“Facing Fear”

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Baptism as we had today - with the little guy who stole the show - is a symbol, a foundational symbol of creation. And, in this act of water, we recognize both the profound power to destroy, as well as the necessity for healing and hope, and Jesus made it a sacrament. But, he did it because in the ancient world water was chaos. Water was something to be feared. Those who were on ships and sailors were those who had the greatest fear, because they faced the most uncontrollable natural disasters known to humanity in hurricanes, in flooding. Water, more often than not, was something to be feared, except when you were in a desert where it provided life.

So the ancient people created sea monsters and made them almost mythic creatures, so that they would be able to name that, and then hope to overcome its fear, by naming the creature that they so feared. So the sea creature in ancient Cana was Yam, and Yam was the sea monster that created the hurricanes, and the water, and the waves that beat down upon the ships. In ancient Babylon it was Tiamat, and Tiamat was the ancient sea monster that took on the world's worst waves and fears. Even in ancient Judaism you had Leviathan, and Leviathan was another one of those sea creatures that was uncontrollable.

So when Jesus saw the ship out in the sea with the waves crashing against it; when Jesus chose to walk out on that water, Jesus was showing that he had the power to destroy the sea monster of Yam, the sea monster of Tiamat and the sea monster of Leviathan (and Leviathan was even mentioned in the book of Jonah). Yet here is Jesus, controlling the waves and the sea. Jesus had the power to stop the horrors of the storms of our very lives.

Now this act of baptism shows the control over water. Why is baptism a sacrament? Well, it started as a covenant act. In the Old Testament you had circumcision - which I have talked about before: a mark that would separate you from other religions and other faiths, to show that the covenant was made with you. But that Old Testament covenant was something that could only be made with a male and was something that was not easy to do especially to adults. Think about that. You would not want to become part of the Jewish religion as an adult if you had to be circumcised before you could enter - not a lot of fun.

One of the reasons why Christianity grew was that circumcision was no longer required. You had something easier. It is a whole lot easier to have water placed on your head than it is to be circumcised, and so - baptism. And also - I believe this profoundly - Jesus wanted baptism because it could be performed and received by both women and men. All were included in this act of a sacrament - of a covenant act - between God and the person. That is what happened today when Bill [Ekhardt] baptized Owen: a covenant act was performed where God called down from Heaven and said, “This is my beloved son, Owen Michael. He is my child and I claim him as my own. I will watch over him and, because the waters of baptism were placed on his head, I will claim him. I will cease the storms that will take place in his life and I will protect him as my own.”

Now we miss a lot of that because we are Presbyterians. Our more - how do I say it - our Baptist brethren, our Pentecostal brethren, our Holiness brethren, who dunk, understood in

a much more symbolic and very impressive way what that difference between death in drowning and life being pulled out means.

I have shared this before but I will say it again: In the ancient world baptism started with emersion. It was fine when we were baptizing adults because they knew you were going to get dunked and, more than likely, the priest would pull you back up. [Laughter.] But, how sad it was when it was a baby, because the priest would take his robe and cover the nose and mouth of the baby and dunk that baby. They did it in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and it wasn't a pleasant experience like Owen had today. There was a whole lot of crying. But the baby was intended to cry, because when the priest covered the baby's nose and dunked that baby - immersed that baby - that baby was dead. But only by the hand of God and the priest, [who] represented the Triune God, holding that baby out of death in the watery chaos of this world, and bringing it to new life, and alive so it could breathe again. It was God who saved the child from the chaos of death and brought it to new life in the name of the Father; from death to new life in the name of the Son; from death to new life in the name of the Holy Spirit. That was such a visual, powerful recognition of death to new life.

We miss that when we make it so simple that we sprinkle and the baby is just as happy as can be. And, we really need to realize, if we are going to symbolically sprinkle, the profound and powerful symbol that is taking place in that baptism, Owen Michael (yes, you are smiling at me, I see you) [laughter] - in that moment - was brought into death but by the very hand of God was brought to new life. And no matter what waves will trouble him in his life, God will carry him through.

Now, notice that the very Apostles had the opportunity of staring at Jesus face to face; listening to him day in, day out, over and over again, on the Sermon on the Mount, everyplace along the way. [They] heard his miracles, watched his exorcisms, and still they had to put up with storms.

Why are we surprised when you and I have to struggle in life? They had to. Just about every one of those Apostles died in a brutal, horrifying way. Peter who hopped out of that boat and got scared, and was pulled back by Jesus and brought into the boat because he didn't have enough faith, would turn around at the end of his life and - according to tradition - did not want to be crucified in the same way as Jesus, so the Romans turned him upside down and crucified him on his head, till death. And he had the faith and the trust, the courage and the might to accept that punishment - in an even more painful way. That time he had the faith to keep walking on the water no matter what waves of chaos and pain hit him.

[In] the Christian faith when we talk about peace - it isn't that when you become a Christian your life gets easy; your life will often get harder, because God knows that now you are filled with the Holy Spirit and you can take it, when other people around you cannot. More is going to happen in your life, because God knows that you won't sink when so many others around you would. So be prepared. Don't be upset when you struggle. God knows you can take it. And, God can rely on you to weather the trials, the tribulations, the waves and the chaos of life, when so many others could not. In that regard, handling your waves of chaos and worry and struggle can be a badge of honor. [You can think,] "God trusts me to take this on. I can be God's Minister in the world and God knows I will handle it." That is

what God is saying to each and every one of us; but we have to trust in the most-frightening moments of life when the waves are at their worst.

Now I have always had a love-hate relationship with water. I grew up spending just about every single summer in Minnesota. (Now, we didn't call it Northern Minnesota because it was south of Brainerd, and anything south of Brainerd is not Northern Minnesota. In, fact I would argue anything south of the Iron Range is not Northern Minnesota.) But my grandparents had a lake cabin and we were up there all of the time, so we could swim when we were tiny and we would go skiing, We had disks and would put 2 stools up on top of the disk and do circles. I was never coordinated enough to do that while I was standing on my head, like my buddy was, but we loved water. We would float around all the time.

So when I went off to Florida on my year of internship, between my second and third year of seminary, where I met Jill, when my friends came down - he and his wife came down from Minnesota to visit - Jill had to work that day. Thankfully, because she probably wouldn't have married me if she had gone on this trip. We went down to Palm Beach, Florida, because we heard there was this amazing reef right off the coast, and maybe - I am terrible with distance - but maybe 50 yards out, it would go really deep and a reef, and then it was only 12 feet deep, or maybe it was six feet deep. You could see really cool fish. We were snorkeling, so we went out there.

When you go out you try not to stick your head up a lot, and you go out to see fish. So we were snorkeling and we practiced so we would never have to get our whole heads out of the water. So we could blow the water out of our snorkel and breathe, and never get our head above the water line. Well, that was fine. We saw cute little fish here, and an orange one over there, and then all of a sudden, whap, we were caught in this school of blue fish.

Now, when you are a Northern Minnesota boy, you don't know that Florida blue fish bite. [Laughter.] Luckily I didn't know that. Neither of us got bit and they were bouncing all over us. I don't know if there was water in the midst of those blue fish - there were so many. It was just packed. I felt like I was in a sardine can full of blue fish. [Laughter.] It was the coolest thing. To this day I can feel it and see it when I talk about it.

Then, all of a sudden, the school opened up and there was the biggest honking shark [laughter] I have ever seen - and its mouth was open. I found out later they swim with their mouths open when they are feeding. It went up above me, down underneath me and up the other side. I looked down and I saw a ton of sharks underneath me. Luckily, as they parted I saw my buddy - and I saw his foot - and the only compassionate thing I did at that moment was grab his foot and went, "shhhaarrkkk."

Then it was every man for himself. I hightailed it; tried to belly surf. I mean if a boat wasn't pulling me I wasn't very good, but I made it. Michael Phelps would have lost to me in that moment. [Laughter.] I made it to shore and everybody was screaming at us. His wife grabbed him by the shoulder and shook him. Thankfully Jill wasn't there! Apparently the flags had gone up. They were red and black saying get out of the water. The sirens went off, but we were really good at snorkeling. Our faces never got out of the water. [Laughter.] We didn't hear it; we didn't see it, and to this day I don't feel comfortable going into the ocean beyond my little tootsies, because of that moment.

The odds of me ever being bit by a shark are a million to one, but I am scared to death to go into that water - the ocean water – [in] lake water I'm fine.

When we go through a terrible, frightening time, I don't care whether it is cancer you have gone through, or the struggle in a relationship. You name the problem. We all struggle - like military people do - trying to recover from the shock of what happened to us. It takes a great deal of time, a great deal of prayer and a great deal of courage to move beyond that watery chaos - that death-like fear - that you went through in that moment.

The only way you can get through it, is to know that you are not going through it alone - that God the Father will pull you out of death to new life, that God the Son will pull you out of death and bring you to new life and allow you to walk on that water to safety, that God the Holy Spirit will pull you from death to life.

We need to know that this week, because we are playing Russian roulette. We are playing North Korean roulette with the future of our world right now and we should be scared half to death. We should all be getting on our knees asking God to pull us from death to new life, when we are at a moment of watching leaders trying to one up each other in fear; when we should be trying to talk ourselves away from that bitter, frightening end.

Fire and fury is not what is needed in this moment. What we need is the water that puts out the fire and fury. What happened yesterday in Charlottesville, Virginia, puts horrible gaps – wedges – between human beings and people of the same nation, and we have to stand up and say, “Prejudice is wrong.” We have to say with clarity and integrity, “We will not stand for this,” and be clear, so everyone knows that it is wrong and immoral.

Sometimes that takes courage. Sometimes we are fearful that we will sink, that someone may not like us; or - in the case of politicians - vote for us; or - in the case of ministers - follow us. But some things are just right and we have to say them, and it doesn't matter whether we have to deal with the way. Right is right and we trust that God will pick us up and carry us safely forward.

But, we shouldn't have to worry about nuclear war because “God will take care of me,” and continue to play violent language and use violent language. We have to talk with peace, love and healing, and not with threats - because threats beget more threats.

Now we pray that God will bring healing in this North Korean situation; that God will bring healing to our nation; that should be speaking about respect of all human beings. We pray that God will allow us to not sink as a nation, or a world - but bring us safely home.

In God's Holy name, Amen.