

On this first Sunday in Lent, we are invited in our Scripture readings to contemplate the stories of Noah's flood and Jesus' baptism. Each of these are reminding us of God's salvation through water. Water itself is fascinating. We know that water makes up 70% of our Earth's surface. Nearly 70% of our body weight is water. Every living cell requires water, and think for a moment about the power of water. Water can carve through the Earth to create canyons or wear down the land to make mountain ranges. Water has the power to either give life or destroy life. Water can sink great ships, like the Titanic. Waves and storms can pull the unsuspecting under and water can exhibit itself in destructive powers like tidal waves, floods, and tsunamis. Water is the power, unlike any other to be reckoned with on this planet. For the ancients, water symbolized death. Water also symbolized life.

Water of course being that essential ingredient to all of life, and we depend on water for our every need, all living things requiring it. A human can only last a few short days without water before dying of dehydration, even though we can last almost 40 days without food. Water is this source of life, so no wonder water features so prominently throughout Scripture and describing and symbolizing God's acts of salvation. The opening of Genesis describes God's spirit hovering over the waters, that essential element at creation. Then we read of Noah and his family being saved through water as our Apostle says, even in the middle of that planetary flood, as the promises of God are given to us in the rainbow, reminding us of God's loving kindness and mercy to us. Later the Israelites are saved again out of slavery from the Egyptians through water, as they crossed through the Red Sea - that crossing symbolizing that liberation from bondage, including the bondage of sin.

Then the Scripture tells us, 640 years later, there's a similar story when Joshua leads the people of Israel through the waters of the Jordan River, as a reminder that the people of God have to pass through water to inherit God's gift. This is where the fundamental concept of baptism and water is rooted. Jewish practices always included ritual bathing and cleansing like the mikvah. In the ritual,

one would enter the mikvah, the waters by descending the stairs. As you descend, you are impure, but as one would ascend back out the steps and out of the water, you were considered clean and ritually pure. So when we find John the Baptist, as we do in our gospel story inviting the Israelites to be immersed in the waters of the river Jordan, as a sign of repentance, this idea of salvation through water is being exhibited.

As we read, Jesus participates in that baptism of John, as a way to prepare himself for his public ministry. Jesus says this just before he goes for those 40 days out into the wilderness, praying and fasting. These 40 days of Jesus are the foundation for the 40 days of Lent, not counting Sundays. We cheat a little, okay. But the beginning of Lent is the perfect time to reflect on the meaning of water and baptism, and we're going to have a baptism in just a few moments and baptize baby Connor Carmody. We will all renew our baptismal vows at that moment: baptism reminding us that God has always saved people through water, through that symbol of water. We, too, being saved through that symbol of water in baptism.

I took to water like a fish, so I love water. When I was a toddler I learned to swim and I had always been a strong swimmer and I was rather fearless of the water and of the ocean itself growing up. But as a teenager, I was confronted with the power and danger of water when I decided to try and surf some six foot waves while I was traveling in Mexico. My whole family had gone into town, but I thought it would be fun to stay back and surf by myself on what was a pretty deserted beach. I was confident this was a great idea. I thought it would be fun, and I was having a lot of fun, until a particularly monstrous wave got ahold of me (some of you may have experienced this before) hurling me so hard and so deep that I was dragging, and then in the undertow along the bottom of the ocean floor. It felt like forever. I wound up hitting a rock, and I still have a bump on my skull from it that day. I was so disoriented that I could no longer figure out which way was up. And I thought, I might drown occurred to me. I just remember praying to God, and I didn't pray a lot back then, but just sort of that crying out mentally.

In an instant I found myself above the water again. I don't even know how I got there, but I was gasping for air. I remember my lungs hurting, and literally crawling on hands and knees onto the beach and it occurring to me that, "Oh, I could have lost my life," and "Wow, that was incredibly foolish." (You know, two people go swimming too.) That experience humbled me and I felt like I knew not only the power of water but of my mortality in that moment, something I hadn't really faced before or thought about, but I also thought about God's mercy in the midst of my idiocy. I repented of my foolishness. I repented of ever doing that again, because water is incredible. When we think about baptism in this symbol of death and life, as we think about being immersed in the water going under, we are embracing death. As we come up from the water, we are dying to sin and bondage in our old ways and we are merging into new life: the new life that God has for us, where we're following God's call. In this way, we follow Jesus' footsteps.

But baptism, just like the call of Lent of this season that we're in, requires that we prepare our hearts. That is the necessary part. Father Mark talked about it as heart surgery on Ash Wednesday. We repent and turn away from all that has kept us bound and prevents us from doing God's will, all those things we've done and left undone, because notice Jesus' words in our gospel when he says "The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe in the good news."

This word for repent is a beautiful Greek word. Some of you may know it. It's the word metanoia. Metanoia, this word, is not about embracing shame or guilt. By the by, that's not what Lent is about either. Some people might try to tell you that, but just forget about that. Let that go. Metanoia simply means to have a change of mind. It means quite literally to change one's direction and to turn around. That's what the word means.

This is like a call from your divine GPS that you are going the wrong direction, and that if you want to get where you're headed, you do have to turn around. To truly repent of something though, to truly turn around means we have to die to some part of lives we currently hold onto or that holds on

to us. In order to do that, we have to let go to be raised up to that new way of life. Scripture gives us a pattern for repentance: you can just tough it out each step of the way, this concept of metanoia, where we search our hearts asking God to reveal those things in our lives that need changing, that need to be let go. We confess them like we did in our confession, we ask for forgiveness and the power to change. I think some of us, at least I know I get stuck in that step, because sometimes we have to take a step back and we have to ask God just for the desire to change.

I know I have to do that. Sometimes I don't want to change at all, but God has been faithful to give me that desire when I sought it eventually. Then I can ask to actually change. We rely on God's strength. In Scripture, we're told that we will be empowered to take action then that will make it possible to change our lives. Scripture is clear that we may fall and we may falter, and we may fail. In fact, let's just say it, we will fall, and we will falter, and we will fail, but we get back up again with God's help. That is again, metanoia, to turn back and try again. Metanoia isn't something we do once. It's something we do our entire lives. We probably need to do it every day: always seeking hearts open to God's revelation of what the change is. Lent, this beautiful season invites us into this amazing process. It is a beautiful process. Repentance is necessary for baptism, but repentance itself is like baptism, every time we do it.

So my friends, this holy season of Lent has just arrived. Here's our opportunity. We're reminded of our baptism today and we are invited to remember God's saving hand through water in the lives of our ancestors, and in our lives personally. As we repent and we embrace metanoia, we emerge from death into life. And we make that 40 day journey with Jesus in Lent, preparing, opening our hearts to that transformation that God offers each of us. Today I invite you to repent and believe, and embrace metanoia, so that on this Easter you and I can die and rise again with our Lord. Amen.