

Sermon at St. Thomas, January 7, 2007

by Lynn E. Cunningham

Epiphany I, Isaiah 42:1-9; Acts 10:34-38; Luke 3:15-16, 21-22.

1. After consulting with Ron and others, we have decided against putting him down in the Wind River for a full immersion baptism. Instead we will stay here in the church, where it is nice and warm.
2. The sacrament of baptism echoes Israel's crossing the Red Sea, fleeing slavery in Egypt, as told in the Book of Exodus. What was God doing with the children of Israel there? Baptism echoes Israel at the end of 40 years in the wilderness crossing the Jordan River and entering into the Promised Land, as told in the Book of Joshua. What was God doing in that situation?
3. Going down into the water during the sacrament of baptism echoes Jesus going down into death and rising again, as told in the Gospels. Baptism is one of the holy mysteries of the mystery of God's presence and action in our lives.
4. Baptism enacts more than a simple rite of passage. Baptism is the mark put upon the Christian signifying that God rules the heart and soul of the one baptized. God rules the heart and not Satan. Baptism, in the words of the rite we are about to follow, asks the person to be baptized, and asks every one of us here, "to renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God". Baptism asks for a renunciation of "all the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God". Baptism asks a person to put their whole trust in Jesus Christ's grace and love, and nowhere else. Baptism affirms who a person really is at their core.
5. Baptism reminds the community that, at their core, every one is living every moment of time on the boundary with the holy. Baptism grounds the person deeply, at their core in the Holy, and with that grounding guide is given out of the snares set up so seductively by the spiritual forces of Satan.
6. Renouncing Satan, and renouncing all the evil powers of this world is not the kind of talk that many people in the modern world use much nowadays. Using the name Satan too much can set up a picture in the mind that there is a real devil lurking around in the world. But talk of Satan sharpens the image of evil.
7. To get at the power of baptism, let us start by looking at some examples of what might be termed the work of Satan, the work of evil powers in the world. A somewhat minor example occurred last weekend, when a group of snow mobilers ran their snowmobiles back and forth over the Deception Creek cross country ski trail and completely ruined it. The snow mobile riders seem to have just gone crazy with their machines, zig zagging back and forth across the pristine meadows, and gouging out the narrow forest trails, giving no thought to the rights and enjoyment of others. The genuine joy of riding snowmobiles seems to have given way for those people to a kind of lust for unfettered power.
8. A less minor example, is the use and sale of methamphetamines among young people in Dubois and Fremont County.
9. Methamphetamine sale and use might easily be said to be the work of Satan. Methamphetamine, I am told, provides an incredible feeling of euphoria, and power, and

- excitement. For a few moments. And then the brain is cooked, badly damaged. A perfectly genuine desire to feel better, leads to tragedy with this drug. The person's desire to use the drug is an evil of the kind baptism challenges.
10. Frankly, I have been engaged in a spiritual struggle these past few months. I have been charging ahead with creating the best possible liquor store in Dubois.
 11. The struggle comes because a part of me has always been aghast at the very idea of the use of alcohol in any form. I have never used alcohol myself, except for tasting and cooking. I am not entirely sure why this is, but basically, I just do not enjoy the stuff, and any serious use of alcohol conflicts with my sports activities as a long distance runner. I have watched alcohol abuse destroy the lives of close relatives and friends. I know that some members of this congregation have struggled with alcohol abuse.
 12. Moreover, I have handled legal claims on behalf of mentally ill clients who were drinking alcohol to try to self-medicate against the pain of their mental illness, and as a result were denied Social Security disability benefits which they desperately needed.
 13. So, for me the development process for the Ramshorn Inn has been a personal struggle, since I kept wondering to myself, am I doing something that is just deeply evil? and that goes against what I stand for? I was beginning to wonder whether the whole Ramshorn Redevelopment project was a bad idea, a destructive thing, since for me it involved getting heavily involved in the liquor trade.
 14. Have you found yourself struggling with something like this, and unsure whether it was the devil or some evil power that was leading you astray?
 15. But at several points I asked myself, what was the Holy Spirit leading me to do in getting me involved in this project in the first place? If I am truly marked in baptism as Christ's own forever, what is the right thing for me to do in this situation that feels fearfully fraught with moral ambiguity?
 16. I remained convinced that the project as a whole is a good thing. It creates jobs. It provides Dubois with the furniture store that many people have been asking for. The income stream from the liquor store can help support the start up of the furniture store, and maybe some other exciting projects in that building. But the forces of wickedness kept saying in me, Liquor is evil and does evil things. At times I have felt despair about the whole thing.
 17. Have you ever asked for help from Jesus over some situation spinning out of control?
 18. Then I remembered something that I had learned in recent years about drinking water. Maybe the Holy Spirit gently reminded me of this story.
 19. In the late 1990's it became all the rage in endurance sports like running, and biking, and triathlons for everyone to drink lots of water and sports drinks. Dehydration was the threat from failing to drink enough water. My law students started showing up in class carrying bottles of water.
 20. Then around 2002, a friend of mine was walking in a three day fund-raising event to support breast cancer survivors. In response to the written instructions given out in advance, she dutifully drank plenty of water and liquids at every aid station along the way. By the end of the second day, she collapsed at a medical tent, and was rushed to the hospital emergency room. The cause? She had been drinking too much water! She had

- hyponatremia. Her body salts were so diluted by all the liquids she had been drinking that she passed out.
21. So, should water be banned? I suspect several of you in this congregation are open and notorious water drinkers!
 22. At about the same time, the sports world started publicizing the fact that competitors could drink too much water during sports events, and make themselves even sicker than if they had drunk too little.
 23. Drinking water calls for using good sense and balance. So does drinking wine. Many friends who enjoy wine use it in moderation and find it very pleasant and convivial. Wine and liquor seem not to be per se evil. Jesus himself shares wine with the community during communion. How alcoholic beverages are used or abused is what causes pleasure or suffering.
 24. In fact life is full of things and activities that a person can get too much of or too little of.
 25. The key to moderation is to stay grounded in reality and to stay open to the Holy Spirit as the guide.
 26. Renouncing the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God is harder than just simply avoiding a drug or some powerful substance, such as water, just because that drug or other thing can be destructive.
 27. Renouncing the forces of wickedness means remembering who you really are.
 28. At the conclusion of the baptismal rite today, the liturgy calls for the priest to announce that the person who has just been baptized is “sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ own forever”. This is not a trivial or quaint or sententious thing to affirm about someone. “Marked as Christ’s own forever”.
 29. In a world where lots of situations can lead a person astray, enjoying wine, speeding around on snowmobiles, slugging down fresh water, baptism reminds that person that there is a center, a holy center, to hold onto. A guide for sorting out which way leads to God and which way might lead to evil or death.
 30. Perhaps in leading the Israelites across the Red Sea out of Egypt, and again across the Jordan River into the Promised Land, God was marking the Israelites once for all as his own forever, while providing them with the center of their being.
 31. Prayer, support from friends family and church, quietly seeking the inward path to righteousness, all these things are assured to us by the mark of baptism.
 32. Now for some here today who have not been paying close attention, the take away message from this sermon might be: “The Reverend Father told us to enjoy the Jaegermeister, the single malt scotch, and the Pinot Noir wine, but take it real easy on chugging down water.
 33. That would be WRONG!
 34. The rite of baptism which this church community celebrates with Ron Custis today renews for him and for all of us the connection to rootedness in in the Holy. That rootedness gives a firm guide out of the tangles that the spiritual forces of wickedness seek to ensnare us in.
 35. Let us now join together under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in marking Ron as Christ’s own forever.

36. In Jesus name. Amen.