

Baptism of Our Lord  
Matthew 3.13-17  
January 13, 2008  
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

Vacation in Washington State was wonderful! Once again Pastor Mark and I went to Holden Village, the year 'round camp and retreat center nestled deep in the Cascade Mountains, same one we visited last summer with Kristiane. It's so remote it takes cars, planes, boats and busses to get there. The camp's snow plough died the day we got there, so this time there was the added extra of a ride in a bombardier, a tank-like vehicle that is equipped with treads instead of tires for navigating snow. When visitors enter the village, whether on bus or bombardier, the driver gives a short welcome speech, including what time the next meal is and cautions about life in the wilderness. Last July we were told how to avoid encounters of the close kind with bears. On this latest visit we were warned about roof-alanches, a new one on me.

A roof-alanche happens when the deep snow on a roof becomes too heavy to remain stable and slides crashing to the ground. There was three to four feet of snow on the roofs of the buildings when we arrived, so it wasn't hard to imagine someone being buried beneath that weight if it let go. One staffperson told us that a roof-alanche sounds and feels like a VW beetle plunging off the roof and onto the ground. To keep village residents safe, paths between buildings are carved through the snow ten or more feet beyond the perimeter of the roof. (Interestingly, those paths aren't made with shovels or snow blowers, but by young and hearty staff members, young men called mavericks, who don snowshoes and tramp back and forth to pack the newfallen snow.)

Because Holden borders the Glacier Peak Wilderness and many staff and guests cross-country ski or snowshoe into the backcountry, there are annual training sessions on avalanche awareness. We watched a movie one night about avalanches, introduced by the founder of an avalanche awareness institute, and learned that this has been the deadliest season in decades for

Washington State. That's because snowmobiles make the backcountry accessible to more and more winter sport lovers, and also because a rainy fall created a soft, shifting underlayer of snow on which many feet more of snow have fallen in a record number of intense storms whipped up by La Nina.

Holden is a Christian community, one of our Lutheran Outdoor Ministry sites, so there are devotions every day. The day after we saw the film, a village resident spoke about the avalanche of sin that threatens to bury and kill us, and the blanket of grace that keeps us safe so that we don't perish. He told me afterward he chose not to speak about an avalanche of grace because that would conjure up death not life. And yet, I said, we speak about baptism as a **drowning**, a dying to sin and rising to newness of life. I mentioned that we live at the Shore, where the overwhelming power of the ocean, the deadliness of rip tides and undertow, helps us understand that baptism isn't so much a baby bath as a watery grave for the old self that has to die before the new self can be born.

It's easier to see why the old self has to die in the adults who are baptized than in the babies and children. The only sin in infants is original sin, whatever it is in us humans that makes us look out for number one instead of each other, that makes us worship ourselves instead of God. As we grow, we're capable of a whole host of specific sins, ranging from minute to monstrously large ones. When we prepare adults for baptism, they're well aware of how they've fallen short of the glory of God.... Much like the adults whom John baptized in the Jordan River, they want to repent, to turn away from their selfish ways, their immersion in darkness of one form or another, and turn toward the light of Christ, walking on the straight and narrow way He sets before us, ever after.

Almost all of us have been baptized, most of us as infants. That's a sharp departure from the past, when only adults were baptized, and some of them as close to the end of their lives as possible. The Emperor Constantine, who legalized Christianity in the fourth century, waited

until he was on his deathbed to be baptized. That's because the people then believed that **really** big sins could only be forgiven in Holy Baptism. If you committed one of the three whoppers (murder, adultery, or apostasy, denying of the faith) after baptism, there was no forgiveness possible, and no hope of avoiding hell. Not trusting themselves to watch their P's and Q's, people hedged their bets by being baptized just before they exited this life.

I was baptized over 50 years ago, and I've committed plenty of sins since then. I haven't needed any major changes of course or heart like John Newton who went from the slave trade into the ministry, or convicts who experience a jailhouse conversion and go from being criminals to high caliber Christians. But I, like all of us, have taken missteps of sin that have caused avalanches in which I or others were buried, at least temporarily. They say that 90% of people who die in avalanches caused the catastrophe themselves. 'Seems similar to our lives, where we bring so much of our suffering on ourselves. Even **after** our baptism.

In baptism we are a new creation in Christ, but we don't always feel or act like it. Sometimes something looking a lot like the old self rears its ugly head and needs to be cast out. Maybe we selfishly ignore others' needs: the lonely widow on our street or the hungry who visit the food pantry at First Pres or the displaced who live in refugee camps abroad. Maybe we need Jesus to slay the demon of perfectionism or bitterness that has wrapped cords around our heart and threatens to strangle us. Maybe there is an addiction in our life that makes us a slave to its demands so we're not enjoying the freedom of a beloved child of God. If so, there is hope!

Thankfully we no longer believe that committing sin after baptism is an eternal death sentence. What does St. Peter say in this weekend's reading from the Book of Acts?

...[E]veryone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name. Acts 10.43

This weekend's commemoration of the baptism of our Lord calls us to celebrate our own baptism, and what Martin Luther called the **daily gift of our baptismal dying and rising**. We

are baptized once, but we are able to repent and therefore to be “reborn” lifelong. When the avalanche of sin comes crashing down on us, there is the possibility of a reverse avalanche of grace. Jesus, who was sinless, insisted that John baptize Him, as a sign that He identifies with us in our sinfulness. He took our sin upon Himself on the cross, so that we “may not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3.16)... The blessings that flow from Calvary are those of an avalanche in reverse. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

Because we die with Christ in baptism, this life is not all there is. As I read the newspaper a few days ago, I was surprised to see that the quote of the day was by the avalanche expert we’d met at Holden. A reporter interviewed him because the day we viewed the film a 13 year old girl named Emily was killed by an avalanche while hiking in a national forest 60 miles outside of Seattle. My hope and prayer is that her family is rooted in faith, so that belief in Jesus’ resurrection and anticipation of Emily’s will shed a ray of light in the darkness of grief.