

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

By Eric Howell

1 Peter 3:18-22

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Just in case you have sat through the service this morning hearing about Lent and wondering if you were the only one who didn't get the memo entitled, *What is Lent?*, I'll say a few words about it. Lent is one of the seasons in the church year. Advent is the first one each year, looking forward to the coming of Christ. Christmas is the second season, a short one, just a couple of weeks, but the celebration of the coming of Christ. Epiphany is actually just one day, but it's sort of a season following Christmas when we try to understand the implications of the coming of Christ. And then Lent, which started Wednesday, is forty days, not counting Sundays, prior to Easter. The number forty in the Bible almost always represents a long and difficult struggle followed by a breakthrough and renewal. Particularly, Lent remembers the forty days Jesus fasted and prayed in the wilderness immediately following his baptism. Sundays aren't included in the forty days because each Sunday in the year is a little Easter—it's a feast day, a day of celebration, not a day of mourning. Yet, our worship during Lent comes with muted colors, sober prayers, songs often in the minor key. It's not an attempt to be maudlin. Rather it is a serious season that points our attention to our own, and our world's sin, failures, unrighteousness. It's a time to be real.

And that's why many people, as you hear, give up something during Lent. Some people give up their favorite TV show, or fast for a day or more, or give up some favorite food during this period. Some people add something to their lives: they read the Bible more or give more money away—something they weren't doing before that they are doing now. There's no one prescribed way to observe Lent; the point is that in changing the rhythm of your life, you create a disconnect in your daily routine. In so doing, every time you bump up against the desire to consume that which you have decided to disavow, you remember Lent. More importantly of course, you remember Christ. One good way to use those moments when you really want that coke or chocolate and the urge is on you, turn to the Jesus prayer that we introduced earlier. We'll have some time to practice the Jesus prayer each Sunday with the purpose that the prayer will be planted in the rich soil of your heart and will spring up when you most need it. It is all our prayer: "Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." As Epiphany is the season when we come to grips with the incarnation, Lent is a season when we come to grips with the crucifixion and with the sin of humanity that was taken to the cross.

Lent is therefore also a season where in the old days and still in some traditions candidates for baptism were prepared. Baptism represents the old being washed away and the new being born. This preparation and teaching is called *catechesis*. One can easily imagine a forty-day period of study, discipline, and prayer in preparation for baptism on Easter morning. What would be more beautiful than to end this dark season with a glorious happy Easter morning gathered around the baptismal pool to watch as new life is born?

Not surprisingly then, on this first Sunday of Lent, the lectionary points us to three passages from scripture that are about water, cleansing, renewal, salvation, and baptism.

Together they serve as an invitation and appeal to anyone who is not baptized. Come to new life in Jesus Christ and profess your faith in him, and join the body of Christ, the church; come and be baptized.

These passages also serve as a reminder to those of us who have been baptized to remember what has happened to you. You stood in front of a congregation and were lowered into water and were raised. Some words, a blessing was said upon you. All those other people there were all dry. You were sopping wet. What happened?

Peter, in the New Testament, says that what happens to us when we are baptized reminds him of what happened in the Old Testament flood. You know, Noah's flood. Most people probably have some idea of the flood. Even if you don't know the scripture story exactly, you've seen children's room decorations with all the little animals happily sticking their heads out the porthole windows of the big boat that carried them all, two by two, to dry ground. Green and yellow are the happy colors. What we miss in the children's version is the utter violence of the event. Yes, in the story, a family of eight and animals, two by two, were rescued. But I've never seen a crib bumper with depictions of what happened to everyone and everything else.

God looked down on creation, his beloved creation, and saw nothing but great wickedness and continuous evil. So much so that God who once said, "Let there be light," looked down and saw only darkness. God who once said, "Let us make man in our image," looked down and saw man and woman cursing God. "It is good." Looked down and said, "I am sorry that I have made them." God, who once blessed them, now cursed them. "I will blot out man, whom I have created, from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I ever made them." What a sad and terrible conclusion.

Yet there was one man, Noah, who found favor in God's eyes. You know the story. God told Noah to build an ark.

So Noah and his family and the creatures pile into their floating zoo and are all lifted off the ground and float in safety. Forty days and nights they floated until the waters subsided. The Life Boat found ground. The mud dried. Creation started again.

The boat became a Christian symbol based partly upon the rescue that God gave Noah during the flood. Christians also pictured the disciples on their little boat as a picture of the church tossed on the sea of disbelief, worldliness, and persecution, finally reaching safe harbor with its cargo of souls. The idea is as old as Tertullian to compare the church to the ark of Noah, secured by God's grace, floating high on the seas of agony and destruction, preserved by God's goodness until the end. People, saved in the boat, who don't ever even get their feet wet.

But I'm not so sure that when we read ourselves into the story of Noah and the flood that we should assume that we are on deck and not under water. Do you really believe that if God were to pick eight people in the whole world to rescue because of their righteousness you'd be on the list? I've met you. It's a good thing that in baptism we get wet, all wet, because what we are remembering is that if we wrote ourselves into the story of the flood, we'd be wet. We'd be underwater. It's not because of our righteousness or goodness that we are saved. We are immersed because we would have been immersed. The water of baptism is the same water that

once covered the face of the earth. Now, like then, it is the agent of new life as the old is washed away and the new is born.

In Christ, God rescued the whole world through the cross. Salvation is nothing less than the sweeping away of the old life in us and the beginnings of the new. Everyone gets a second chance. Another New Testament writer, Paul, writes, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation." The power of the flood waters that once covered the whole earth are reflected ironically by the seemingly calm, tame waters of baptism that have the power to drown not just flesh and blood, but to wash out our souls.

Love Lifted Me

*I was sinking deep in sin, far from the peaceful shore,
Very deeply stained within, sinking to rise no more,
But the Master of the sea, heard my despairing cry,
From the waters lifted me, now safe am I.*

*Love lifted me! Love lifted me!
When nothing else could help
Love lifted me!*

*All my heart to Him I give, ever to Him I'll cling
In His blessed presence live, ever His praises sing,
Love so mighty and so true, merits my soul's best songs,
Faithful, loving service too, to Him belongs.*

*Souls in danger look above, Jesus completely saves,
He will lift you by His love, out of the angry waves,
He's the Master of the sea, billows His will obey,
He your Savior wants to be, be saved today.*

I have had too many people in my ministry say, "I'd like to become a Christian and be baptized, but I'm not good enough." I'm just treading water here, sopping wet with guilt and shame. I'm not like the people who must be up on that boat, dry, happy, good people. I'm not like them.

But the Life Boat of God is full of the kinds of people you don't think are on it. There's a woman I'm aware of who was picked up on the side of the road by a person she'd never met and taken to a church. She was used to getting into cars of strangers. It was her profession. She wasn't used to being taken to a Saturday night worship service. She was used to being reduced to a tool of lust. She had never been the recipient of total love. It changed her life. She soon was baptized upon her confession of faith in Jesus and stood there dripping wet in front of a very respectable congregation. Then she volunteered to help with the children's ministry of the church. The pastor made her a deal. If she could keep her life straight for six months, he'd welcome her as a leader. Six months to the day she showed back up in his office. Today, she's on staff of a very respected church, ministering to children and families and passing on to other people what she received from Christ. The love of Christ plucked her from the drowning waters and lifted her up.

The Life Boat of God is full of all kinds of people. There's a man I'm aware of who was as tough as nails, I can do it myself, curse you out at a moment's glance, go ahead knock this chip off my shoulder guy. He got up every morning looking for a fight—from his wife, his kids, his co-workers, his fellow church members, maybe God. And he often got it. Then he decided to fight himself. He had a habit he decided to break. It went from an occasional indulgence to an everyday, then multiple times a day habit that owned him. So he made up his mind and went to war—on himself. He fought, he battled, he struggled, he turned every one of his weapons on himself and couldn't win. The one opponent he thought he could master had mastery over him. So one night, all alone in the dark basement of his home, he contemplated suicide—the ultimate victory over himself. In a strange way of thinking—he'd win by losing. Instead, the calculus changed. He surrendered. He fell on his knees, sobbing, crying to God for help. For forgiveness. Not just for this, but for everything in his life, for the state of his soul. Eventually he got up and stopped fighting everyone. He was kinder and softer. He had been humbled. He understood that life isn't perfect, no one else is, and neither is he. And he got healthy by letting grace match his determination. He is now the most effective and enthusiastic servant in the congregation, serving immigrants, children, and giving sacrificially every day. The grace of Christ plucked him from the waters.

All kinds of people have been lowered into the waters of baptism and plucked from them to new life. They've all discovered that the waters are full of God. And as they come up, dripping wet, like a newborn baby, the moist eyes of the congregation standing around them are full of God, too.

Want to go into those waters? They are dangerous and powerful. They have a power to them beyond memory, beyond symbol, beyond metaphor. They are the waters of new life.

Perhaps you are ready. Your readiness isn't because you've crawled out onto dry land and towed yourself off. It's that you are drowning and Christ has plucked you from the depths. It's that you have experienced the grace and love of God through Jesus Christ inviting you to new life, to a new community, to grab an oar on the Life Boat. If you think you might be ready, any of our staff would be delighted to talk with you and pray with you. And baptize you. It will be the Easter moment in whatever dark Lent life has been.

All kinds of people have been plucked from the waters. Look at us here. We all have a story—some terrible and dramatic, some blessed by consistency and faith. We are bound by the journey through the waters of baptism that make us and our stories God's. Thanks be to God.