



SAINT MARK'S

EPISCOPAL CHURCH

The waters of lake Michigan are vast. If you have never had the chance to see the Great Lakes before, words can't describe their vastness. And while it is called a lake think more fresh water sea than lake, with all the characteristics of the ocean. In fact, it is something like Lake Michigan that I imagine whenever I hear Gospel stories about the sea of Galilee.

You see, I spent my summers as a child growing up by this lake. And this was a rare kind of place, in this day and age, where instead of mostly watching tv or playing video games you went outside and just made up stuff todo, to pass the time. And one of my favorite games, that my friend and I came up with, went something like this: We would each take a foam boogie board and paddle out, past the breaking waves, past the first sand bar, just past the second sand bar, to a peaceful spot where the noise of the beach lessens, the waves stop breaking and they just bob you up and down. This is where the real contest began.

You would untether from your board, draw in a huge gulp of air and dive. Dive down into the water, go all the way down to the bottom, grab a handful of sand and then race back to the top throwing the sand on the board as proof that you made it to the bottom. We would take

turns diving. When we both had come up with sand, we would then swim just a little bit further out, where it was deeper, and dive again. Get the sand, go deeper. Out further and deeper, and out further and deeper.

Eventually, we would get far enough out that the people looked like specks on the beach and it was silent. All you could hear was the wind and the waves. You take a deep breath and dive. Down, down, down you go. It starts to get dark. It starts to get cold. Down and down, your hands are straining for sand. The pressure of the water weighs in on your ears. It's only you, your thoughts, and your heart beat. You start to think the lake floor will never come but then you finally hit sand. Then there is this moment, with a handful of sand, you look up, you can see the sunlight, barely glimmering and refracting through the water. You know up there is sun, and warmth and family and friends; joy of new life. But for that instantaneous moment, it's just you and God, in the deep, in the tomb-like, depths of the water. You only have your lung full of air, and so your race back up confident you will make it, but also wondering in the back of your mind what if you don't. This far under you remember that for all the life giving properties water has it also has the power of death.

I, probably like many of you, was baptized as an infant and have no recollection of my own Baptism. But I am sure it was like most Episcopal baptisms, beautiful prayers but lacking large quantities of water. It's the kind of baptism where they just sprinkle some water on your head, which is fine, but lacks the symbolism of this tomb-like aspect of the baptismal waters, that going down in water can provide. So instead, it is this diving moment that I like to think of when I think of baptism. Paul writes to the

Romans "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life."¹ We are baptized into Christ death as much as we are baptized into his resurrection. And you may be wondering: what all this talk of water and baptism is about? That I must have grabbed the wrong sermon manuscript, that today is Ash Wednesday, I should be talking about ashes and mortality.

Your right, today is Ash Wednesday, in a few moments, we will formally be invited to the observance of a holy Lent. Next to Christmas and Easter, Lent is probably one of the most recognizable seasons of the Church year. You see, Lent is a highly visible church season, there are so many outward signs of Lent: ashes on the forehead, changes in habits, giving up things, taking on new habits, New types of prayer, changes in liturgical colors and liturgical practices on Sundays. Lent is full of outward signs and, by and large, these outward expressions are a good thing. We acknowledge that we need to change; that we should not get complacent. That, like the first Christians, we should prepare for the days of our Lord's passion and resurrection by observing a season of penitence and fasting. But these outward signs and expressions can, and very often do, get divorced from their meaning. We can easily forget what all these things are about and the outward signs just lead to a general sense of gloom. We can get caught up in the mindset that Lent is just about generally feeling bad for a period of time so that we can be

¹ Romans 6:3-4, NRSV

happy and joyful come Easter time. We can become like the hypocrites from the Gospel lesson more focused on the outward signs of Lent and forget the inward meaning. We can forget what Lent is really all about.

Lent, like a lot of things in the Church, is all about our Baptism. It's the time of the church year where we especially focus on that first half of our Baptism. The Baptism into Christ's death. This Lent go deeper into the tomb of your baptismal waters; play that diving game in those waters.

This Ash Wednesday, we have waded out past the second sand bar, where the waves of your baptismal waters are bobbing you up and down. You can stay on the surface and participate in the superficial gloom of Lent. Or you can dive deep, go down, and down in your baptismal waters where it is cold and dark, silent from the pressure of the water weighing in. Down where it's only you and God. As you spend these 40 days down there take time to examine yourself and examine your relationship with God. God does not want you to be gloomy for 40 days, God wants you to be in relationship with him.

So use the outward signs, the ashes on your forehead, the disciplines of giving something up or taking something on, as a reminder of going down deeper in your baptismal tomb. And when you are there, consider those things that have come up during that prayer and self-examination. Take whatever you don't like, whatever is weighing you down, whatever in your life is causing a stumbling block to a greater relationship with God, whatever parts of your life that you need to let die, and leave them there in that tomb. Let the pressure of those waters consume it. Let it die there and start swimming back up through those

baptismal waters. Up to where there is light, and warmth, and family and friends. Up to where there is new life.

While we are down deep in the baptismal waters in Lent we can look up and see the New Paschal light of the Easter vigil , shining and refracting. The joy of the Paschal Light awaits us when we surface in 40 days, the joy of new life awaits us. My sisters and brothers in Christ, you are invited to the observance of a holy Lent, dive deep.