“Plunging into God”

a homily on baptism by

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St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA

Scripture: Luke 8:26-39

OK. Let’s review our Gospel for today. We have Jesus as exorcist, a man possessed by not one demon, but many, and a herd of pigs who jump to their deaths at Jesus’ command…

Seminary Tuition: $30,000  
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Curate doing her first baptism with this Gospel passage: Priceless.

But really, on the surface, it does seem that we have quite a challenge in front of us on this baptism day. Our passage is focused on evil…on demonic posession by sin—an offputting focus for the baptism of anyone in our modern era, never mind the baptism of an infant, especially one as easy-going and agreeable as cherubic Emily. Further, our primary symbol of baptism, water, is evoked as a means of death, rather than new life.

So, where do we go from here?

We go where the waters of baptism take us…and that, is deeper. We leave the surface, and we plunge ourselves into the depths of this Word, the depths of our own experiences of God, and into the depths of Christian community, itself.

Two weeks ago I had the privilege of spending a few evenings with my fellow newly-ordained priests, and a senior priest named Martin Smith. We asked Martin to talk with us, to mentor us, in the craft of assisting others in deepening their spiritual lives. Most of us anticipated that he would teach us different forms of meditation, maybe some avant garde forms of dance prayer or sung prayer. But, perhaps of some relief to those of you who would rather eat worms than spend time dancing to a pan flute—believe me, that is a thing--Martin did not talk about any of those things. When asked about deepening our spiritual lives, Martin talked about baptism.

Martin talked about the water of baptism as our primary symbol of not just Christian community, but mission—he talked of baptism as the work to which we are all called. The mission of God, he said, is that all shall be baptized.

I know…WHOAH…it may seem as if this sermon has been overtaken by a Christian Fundamentalist, but hear me out.

Baptism is meant to plunge us into God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit—that we might be surrounded by the reality of the vastness of God—God the Father and Mother creating and passionately loving all things; God the Son living among us, guiding us and beckoning us to places and people that no one else will visit; God the Holy Spirit breathing courage and a fiery conviction for justice into each of us.

In this week of yet more violence, yet more fear, yet more helplessness and hopelessness, this morning, Emily, and each of us as she invites us to literally re-member our own baptisms, plunge ourselves into God.

It is awkward to talk about death at a baptism. And yet, if we leave the surface of our Gospel story today and go deeper, we find that those demons plunging to their deaths may not actually be a bad symbol of baptism. Does not our awareness of ourselves as swimming in God drown our own demons? Swimming in God is the experience, however momentary, that God is all around us--God in us and through us, God urging us this way and that, God softening the impact. In this experiential reality of the infinity of God’s love, our demons lose their power—they lose their life. Our feelings of aloneness or isolation, our worry that we just aren’t good enough, our fear of each other, are each drowned. Sin, when it’s defined as living in these mindsets, is washed away.

That water in which the demons drowned enabled new life for the man who remained. Living in the tombs, completely cut off from all friendship and love, that water restored him to the community, and promised that the demons of isolation and alienation, of fear and hatred, would never return to inhabit him again.

That is baptism. Baptism is our plunging, again, and again, and again, into the depths of God, Father and Mother, Son, and Holy Spirit—into the life-altering reality that we are never alone, that we are perpetually, radically, and unconditionally loved, and that God, the water holding us up, can absorb the demons that rise out of our fear. But this knowledge is hard to hold onto. Once we are dry and back on shore, it is hard to remember that God is still all around.

So, we plunge into the waters of baptism together. Parents and Godparents, and we, Emily’s Christian community, on behalf of every Christian community she will take part in across her life, jump with Emily this morning into the waters of God. In plunging with her this day, and marking her as Christ’s own forever, we pledge to remind her day after day, year after year, that she is inhabited by her Creator, is led by Jesus, and is inspired by the Spirit. We pledge to remind her that she is never alone, that God can hold all her fear and anger, and that hope is not just reasonable, but is life, itself.

This is the mission of God—that we remind not just each other, but every single person, that they are not alone, that they are dearly loved, and that they, too, are inhabited by God, led by God, inspired by God. We do that not only by words, but by actions. We do it by physical embrace, by feeding and clothing, by treating each person we encounter as God’s own, and by demanding with our one powerful voice that our laws and our institutions also treat each and every person as God’s own.

So, come to the water and remember. Join with Emily, and plunge again into God, Father/Mother, Son, and Holy Spirit. AMEN.