

The First Sunday in Lent, March 20, 2019

The great city of Milan is distinguished by a grand cathedral. The Duomo hosts thousands upon thousands of tourists every year. It is filled with beauty and wonder. For me, though, the real treasure was underground. If you enter the cathedral doors there is, on the east side, a discreet location with descending stairs that will take you underneath the piazza or plaza that is in front of the Duomo. There you will see the remains of the 4th century church hall and baptistery.

It's the photo on the cover of your bulletin. The picture was taken by our friend Loren. While he was snapping pictures the rest of us were surveying the remains. I must confess this was quite a moment for me. A liminal moment, if you will where the veil between heaven and earth is paper thin. A sense of being in time and out of time simultaneously. Or, maybe, because I am a church nerd, I was just geeking out. You see this was the very place where in 387, Ambrose, the great Bishop of Milan baptized Augustine who would become one of the most influential teachers in the Western church.

The pool is essentially a baptismal pool that is about 10 feet in diameter and about 4 feet deep. Folks would enter from one end and go under the water and up and walk through the other end. Truly, this space captured the journey that is baptism. And, as I think you can tell from the photo, it is an eight-sided pool. Ambrose spoke of it as symbolic of the "Eight Day." Yes, God created the world in seven days and on the eighth day God re-created the world with the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The eighth day, a day in time but beyond time signaling eternity and a new creation. The newly baptized entered a brand-new day and a brand-new life with a brand-new sense of time.

When the Israelites crossed the Jordan, they entered a new life. God's promise is that the new land would be filled with abundant blessing. A land flowing with milk and honey. What a great thing to look forward to after forty years in the wilderness.

Ambrose and his contemporaries spoke of baptism as entering the promised land. An entry into a new and promised land where you arrive at the table of the Eucharist, a land flowing with milk and honey. In fact, many of those baptized were given a cup to drink at their first communion filled with a delightful mixture of milk and honey.

Today Xia and Rachel sign their names in the book of names of those who have enrolled for baptism. They go public with their intention to be baptized. They are responding to God's call. Today we pray for them and with them and, along with their sponsors, pledge to journey with them to the Easter Vigil. They endorse their desire for Christ with the signature of their name.

How exciting! They are on a journey to the eighth day. They look forward to entering a new creation, a veritable land flowing with milk and honey.

Now, does that mean that they will suddenly be entering a life that is filled with heavenly

bliss? Hardly. The Christian life often feels like the wilderness more than the promised land.

Consider Jesus' baptism where he was anointed with God's Spirit and the Father named him his beloved son. "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Then what happens? No sooner is he baptized, and he finds himself in the wilderness for 40 days dealing with the devil. A forty day fast filled with struggle.

I wonder if Jesus ever asked himself this question: "Is this what I signed up for?"

Baptism does not make life simpler or easier. In fact, bearing God's Spirit may invite its own set of challenges. Signing on the dotted line today does not suggest that our catechumens are signing on to a Carnival Cruise. The Christian life is real life with real struggles, real brokenness, real suffering, real sin and real temptation.

In his wilderness journey with the devil, Jesus renounces evil at least three times, resisting the temptation to use power to bedazzle or take control or prove himself. Jesus instead clings to the power that is divine love.

Just so, at baptism we renounce evil three times. You know the drill ...

Do you renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God?
I renounce them.

Do you renounce the powers of this world that rebel against God?
I renounce them.

Do you renounce the ways of sin that draw you from God?
I renounce them.

As we prepare for Easter by walking alongside Xia and Rachel and all the folks from the WAY process and our 8th grade confirmation class who are preparing to renew their baptismal vows, what does this act of renunciation look like?

Well, look to Jesus who didn't play the devil's little games and did not return evil for evil but engaged in resistance to evil by placing his trust in God.

I wonder if Jesus in this wilderness adventure, while contending with evil, had a greater promise and a greater assurance at work beyond the question, "is this what I signed up for?" I wonder if the words spoken at his baptism were ringing in his ears: "You are my beloved Son. In you I am well pleased."

Even in his wrestling match with the devil, I suspect Jesus dwelled in the love of God, clinging to this as his essential identity.

Cling to the promise that you are loved!

Renouncing evil isn't about will power or accomplishing great feats or striving to be perfect. I think it is about letting go and dwelling deeper and deeper into the things of God.

You were named beloved at your baptism. Let that be your identity. Lent is a great time to remember the promise of God who says to you, "You are my beloved child and in you I am well pleased."

When the Israelites prepared to enter the Promised Land, Moses instructed them to remember: "When you enter the land remember the Lord who brought you out of Egypt, who delivered you and brought you to this land flowing with milk and honey and bring the first fruits of the ground and present them as an offering to the Lord."

Remember, you who dwell in the promised land of God's mercy and love. Remember to remember! Remember who you are by clinging to the one true God who has delivered you and set you free and love you to no end.

Old Ambrose preached to the newly baptized about the renunciations: "Be mindful of your words of renunciation and never let the contents of this bond pass from your memory."

Yes, remember and remember even more the to whom you turn at baptism who washes us and anoints us with the eternal promise of fidelity.

Look to Jesus and look to him, first, as more than just an example but as God's precious gift who forgives and heals and gives you wisdom. That word is very near you on your lips and in your hearts. As near as the bread and cup we will soon share at this meal filled with Resurrection hope and life. Amen.