

May 21, 2017 – 1 Peter 3:13-22

March 30th was the third anniversary of a very important day. A very important day for my young daughter. You see, that was the anniversary of her funeral.

Yes, her funeral. Now, clearly, something odd is going on here since my daughter is sitting right back there with my wife in the last pew. And that's probably because, from the outside, March 30th 2014 didn't look like her funeral. It looked like her baptism.

And, accordingly, it was a time of celebration and joy. The cute little baby in the white baptismal gown. And the congratulations and the reception and the pictures and the other trappings we associate with baptism. They're all very happy and light.

But then we read what St Peter and St Paul have to say about baptism. And things become quite a bit darker and more gloomy. Quite a bit more morbid, actually.

It's not that baptism is supposed to be a tremendously sad event. But it is supposed to be a solemn one. A reflective one. A deep and meaningful one. With even a note of tragedy to it.

Because, no matter whether you read about it from Peter or Paul, baptism is always associated in some way with death. With our own individual death. With the deaths of thousands of people in the Flood. With the death of Jesus Christ. You can't talk about baptism without talking at least a little bit about death.

Peter does that today in our Epistle lesson. And he talks about baptism in terms of Noah. Noah, who lived in a world so filled with violence and corruption that God decides to wipe it clean and start over.

And so he finds the one halfway righteous man left on the planet and says, "Build an ark for yourself and your wife, for your three sons and their wives, eight people total. And fill it with two of every kind of animal. Because I'm going to destroy the earth with water. And I'm going to bring new life to the earth through your family and through the animals you bring with you."

So Noah builds the ark. It's huge. Monstrous. 500 feet long. 80 feet wide. 50 feet high. God spells out the exact dimensions for us. It's massive. And, if you've ever seen a picture of what it might have looked like, or visited the replica they recently build in Kentucky, it looks a little like a giant coffin.

Which is ironic. Because inside this floating coffin were the only people alive on the entire earth. Everyone else – thousands upon thousands of people – were dead. Drowned in the water of the only flood to ever destroy the entire earth.

Drowned because there was nothing worth saving out there. The people weren't worth saving. And if the people weren't worth saving, then the animals weren't worth saving either. They were made for man after all.

The only thing God decided was worth saving was Noah and his family and the little pocket of creation that came with them on the ark to meet their needs and the needs of those who would come after them.

Now, when I say Noah was "worth saving" I don't mean that he was perfect. Far from it. As we would later find out, Noah was a drunkard with a temper. The first thing he builds after the flood is a vineyard so that he can replenish his supply of wine. The whole earth is destroyed. They have a monumental task of rebuilding ahead of them. But Noah's gotta have his booze.

No, Noah wasn't saved because he was such a good man. He was saved because God chose to save him. Because God looked around at the population of the earth and said, "I can't do anything with these losers. But this guy? At least this guy still knows I exist. I can do something with him."

And God does do something with Noah. He destroys humanity with water. But he also saves humanity with water. Think about it. The ark only saves Noah because God uses water. If God had destroyed the earth with fire or earthquake or disease, the ark would have offered no protection. But by water, God both killed humanity and saved humanity.

That duality between God using the same thing to kill and to save happens all over the Bible. Pharaoh and his armies are killed by passing through the Red Sea. The Israelites are saved by passing through the Red Sea. The Israelites were killed by fiery serpents in the desert. The Israelites were saved by a bronze serpent lifted up in the desert. It happens over and over again.

And it's at the core of Jesus' crucifixion. Because just as the flood was an implement of death and an implement of salvation. Jesus' crucifixion is an implement of death and an implement of salvation. Peter emphasizes that contrast three times in our lesson today.

"Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous." Christ flips everything on it's head. It is the righteous who should be rewarded. And the unrighteous who should suffer for their sin. But on the cross, a righteous man suffered for sins. And the unrighteous are rewarded. The righteous man dies. And we, the unrighteous, live.

"That he might bring us to God." Here again, that same contrast. The one who dies and descends into hell is also somehow the one who brings us to God in heaven. We follow Jesus into the gates of death's prison. And yet, walk into the glory of paradise. The same path that leads to death, also leads to life and salvation.

And finally, we have this last one: *"being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit."* And this is where baptism comes in. This is where the crucifixion really has meaning for us.

Jesus was put to death in the flesh. We know that. Yet, death could not keep its hold on Jesus. Because the moment his flesh died, his spirit was made alive. And conquered death for us. And raised his body from the dead on the third day. Jesus took the power to kill him and turned it into the power to save him and give him life again.

That same power is at work in baptism. The power to kill is also the power to save. Because in our baptism, we are killed. Our spirit dies right along side of Jesus. Our soul is drowned like all those horrible people in the flood. Who weren't worth saving. Our conscience is not clean. And it convicts us of our sin.

But we are also given an ark. Salvation by water. That same power to kill our souls, is also the power to make us alive in the Spirit. To give us a new spirit with a clean conscience that is right with God and lives eternally. Baptism now saves you.

And, like Christ, because we are alive in the spirit, we too will live again in the flesh. Not on the third day. But on the day he calls us from the grave.

The power to kill us is the power to save us. The day that Jesus died was also the day that he lived, to the glory of God the Father. And the day that my daughter was baptized. And I was baptized. And you were baptized.

That was the day you died. That was the funeral for the soul you had been born with. A soul that was sinful and violent and dirty. And not worth saving.

And so, by the power of Jesus' death, God killed that soul. And made you alive in the spirit. The day of your baptism was the day of your funeral. But it was also the day of your rebirth.

It is your heavenly birthday. Like Noah, it is the day that God looked down from heaven and said, "You're not perfect. You're not even good. But I can bring you through the water. And I can do something amazing in you." Amen.