

27 March 2019
Lent 3 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Walking Through the Water”

Text: Exodus 14:10-15:1; The Passion, part 3

One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.

Neil Armstrong famously said those words when he stepped onto the surface of the moon. And the place where his foot first set down was called the Sea of Tranquility. But there was no water in that sea, so called - just the dry surface of the moon. It was a defining moment for Neil Armstrong. From now on he would be known as the first man to walk on the moon.

So, too, for Israel. The first step an Israelite took onto the dry ground that had been where the Red Sea was, but was no longer, was a small one. And yet, one giant leap for Israel. From this day forward, nothing would be the same again. This was a defining moment for Israel. From this day forward, they would be known as the people God brought out of Egypt and through the Red Sea.

You have gone through a sea as well - the sea of Baptism. Most of us didn't step up to or into the font, but were carried, as many very young and very old Israelites surely were through the Red Sea. So no small step for us, but still a giant leap. A leap from sinner to saint. From dead in sin to alive in Christ. From son of man to son of God. From no hope to full of hope. You were crucified and buried with Christ, and risen with Christ, and so from that day forward are known as a child of God.

And though it look rather unimpressive, especially compared with walking on the moon or through the Red Sea - that leap, your leap, was the most giant of all. Yet you didn't do it at all. It was all the work of God for you. Those waters, at the command of God and with the Word of God, both killing and saving, making alive.

As it was for Israel at the Red Sea. At the command of God and with the Word of God, those waters both killed and saved, made alive. As Israel passed through them, they were given new life. Yet for Pharaoh and his finest, pursuing Israel and trying to re-enslave them, they brought death. It is a picture of your Baptism. For your sins, which seek to enslave you, are drowned, but you are brought safely through to forgiveness. Death, which seeks to devour you, is rendered toothless, but you are brought safely through to life. One giant leap, indeed.

We often like to crow about our own strength. Pharaoh, the leader of Egypt, did. Peter,

the leader of the twelve, did. And if we can put a man on the moon, there's nothing we can't do! Pharaoh wasn't going to let Israel go. No way, no how. Peter wasn't going to deny Jesus. No way, no how. Yet in the end it was Pharaoh's horses and chariots that weren't going anywhere, when the Red Sea closed back over them and drowned them. And it was the crowing of an ordinary rooster that brought mighty Peter down to size and reduced him to tears. And baptism does this for us. For you can't baptize yourself, and you can't save yourself. No way, no how. But be baptized, and you have what nothing else in this world can give: eternal life.

But we heard about someone else tonight as well: Judas. He thought he was strong, but in the end he was drowning in a sea, too. A sea of regret and guilt and shame and sin and despair. The results of his betrayal were crashing down on him like the waves of the sea. There have been various theories put forth to explain why Judas did what he did, but in the end, this is not what he expected. Not what he thought would happen. A small step forward to kiss Jesus, followed by the giant leap to the cross.

So Judas confessed. ***I have sinned. I have betrayed innocent blood.*** He was reaching for a lifeline - the lifeline the priests at the Temple were supposed to give him. They were there to do the sacrifices. They were there for the forgiveness of sins. They were there at the command of God and with the Word of God. Yet the Word of God they did not speak. ***What is that to us? That is your affair,*** they said. They pushed Judas under the water. Imagine a baptism where all you do is push people under the water but don't bring them back up. That's what they did to Judas.

It is what would happen to us were it not for Jesus. But as God led the people of Israel safely through the Red Sea, so He pulls you up out of your watery baptismal grave and gives you life. It is your sin that is drowned, but you live. And in the same way, the one who pulls you out of the water of baptism will also pull you out of the grave on the Last Day. Judas betrayed innocent blood, but that innocent blood will never betray us. Rather, that blood covers us with the forgiveness of the Lamb of God. The Passover Lamb protected Israel from death, and the Lamb of God does the same for you.

Judas didn't know that forgiveness, and the priests didn't speak it to him. And so, as we heard tonight, the sad words of the prophet Jeremiah were fulfilled: ***They took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of him on whom a price had been set by the children of Israel, and gave them for the potter's field.***

For us, too, the words of the prophet are fulfilled. But better words than these. Word like this:

*But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,*

and with his wounds we are healed (Isaiah 53:5).

*[H]e bore the sin of many,
and makes intercession for the transgressors* (Isaiah 53:12).

And this one too:

Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved (Mark 16:16).

For when Jesus began His work by taking that one small step into the Jordan, and then finished it with that one small step out of the tomb, it really was one giant leap for mankind.

***Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the Lord, saying,
“I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously;
the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.***

We, too, ***will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously;***
our sin and death ***He has thrown into the font.***
But us, He has brought out the other side, to life.

And so in the Easter Vigil, we rejoice as we hear the story of God’s deliverance at the Red Sea. For we know it is the story of our deliverance as well. As so in that service we pray:

O God, You once delivered Your people Israel from bondage under Pharaoh and led them by a pillar of cloud and fire through the sea to safety. Grant that we may so follow Christ that through the waters of Baptism we may daily die and rise with Him and walk in safety through the wilderness of this life until we see Your salvation; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.