# Sermon for June 25, 2023 – Pentecost Lection 12A

Based on Romans 6.1-11 and Matthew 10.24-39

Pastor Elizabeth Liggett

Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Billings, Montana

# I’d like to talk today about water. Life-giving, refreshing, cleansing, quenching water. With the flick of your wrist, this precious resource comes splashing out of the faucet, gushes from the water hose, tumbles cold and filtered from your refrigerator door.

# We take it for granted – assuming the toilet will always flush and we’ll never run out.

# We waste it – running it uselessly down the sink while we wait for just the right temperature.

# We thank God for it – as we gulp it down after a strenuous workout, or witness how it brings a dried-out plant to new life.

#  Water. Life-giving, refreshing, cleansing, quenching water. Absolutely necessary for the sustenance of life.

 Water gives life.

But water destroys life, too.

Undomesticated, out of control, water is dangerous, damaging, destructive. It breeches levees.

It makes walls tumble and makes foundations crumble.

It washes out fields, smothers trees, sweeps away all life in its path.

It comes roaring down like a flash….or rises slowly and insidiously, going where it wills, transgressing all boundaries.

And when it recedes, it leaves in its wake muck and mold and mess and mildew. Roads which pre-flood were smooth and straight are broken up, weakened, washed out. Floors are warped, furniture is saturated, foundations are compromised.

Sometimes, the only thing to do in the aftermath of water’s destructive power is to declare it a loss and start all over again.

 Water.

Life-giving – and death-dealing.

Cleansing – and complicating.

Refreshing – and destroying.

 Do you remember how you were ushered into the Kingdom of God? Do you remember the water?

Picture this: At the appointed time in the worship service, carefully coached by the pastor, the young family stumbles to the front of the church, and gathers awkwardly around the baptismal font. Folks are shined up more than usual for the big event, and eyes shine with pride and gratitude and anxiety and every kind of emotion. The baby is dressed in white – maybe even an heirloom gown, passed down through the generaions -- for one baptizee after another to wear.

 The pastor speaks of holy things, the nervous family fidgets, parents and sponsors and congregation make promises, and then anchoring the baby firmly in her left arm, the pastor holds him over the font, and then (as the congregation collectively holds its breath, anticipating the protests of the baby) dips the shell into the water three times, pours it over the baby’s head, and proclaims this one a Child of God, once and forever.

 It’s a beautiful, precious picture.

A rather…tame…domesticated event.

 As we practice it, baptism seems so….safe. In earlier times, many people viewed it as fire insurance – the guarantee that, should something happen to the child, he won’t be relegated to the depths of hell.

 What they didn’t understand is that there’s nothing safe about baptism. Far from being our ticket into heaven, our baptismal certificate is more like a draft notice: “You’ve been enlisted into Jesus’ Christ’s death-and-life mission here on earth. Report for duty, immediately.”

Our practice of Holy Baptism is to Christian living

 in the same way that

the water we pour from our faucet is to the raging, untamed flood waters spilling over riverbanks, creating havoc and disrupting lives along the way.

 Baptism gives new life.

 Baptism drowns.

 Baptism cleanses and refreshes.

 Baptism is dangerous.

 Many churches practice baptism by immersion. The baptismal candidate is ushered into the water – sometimes a tank, sometimes a swimming pool, sometimes a river or lake ocean.

 At the appointed time, the presider takes hold of the baptismal candidate, and dunks him under the water one, two, three times.

 Down into the perilous water he is submerged, where it’s dangerous and he is vulnerable.

 Down down he goes, buried with Jesus.

 Up, up, he emerges, raised into the resurrection of Jesus.

Forever attached to Jesus’ death and resurrection,

he is from now on attached to Jesus’ mission.

Jesus’ mission to love and bless and redeem this world.

That’s no easy, tame, domesticated mission. When Jesus came to earth the first time, that mission killed him. That is -- those who objected to his mission killed him. They beat him and tortured him and hung him up to die.

 But God’s work of blessing the world won’t be thwarted. Jesus beat back death. His resurrection is our foretaste of the feast to come – the feast of God’s grace and love and justice which one day will blanket this earth – and which already has begun.

 When Jesus returned from the dead, he rallied his forces. To them he proclaimed peace, proclaimed forgiveness, proclaimed a new chance and a new life.

 Then, he armed them with the breath and power of the Holy Spirit, to carry forward into their world his mission to love and bless the world in his name.

 It wouldn’t be easy. As he warned – or assured them – (in today’s reading from Matthew):

 Don’t expect it to be easier for you, or safer or more comfortable, than it was for Jesus.

 Don’t expect the mission – or your participation in it – to bring sweetness and light, or comfort and harmony.

 Don’t expect that you won’t have to make hard choices –

 between doing the easy thing, or doing the right thing.

 Between protecting your own security – or sticking your neck out for someone else.

 Between speaking the truth – or appeasing your loved ones.

 Between protecting your bodily life – or preserving your soul.

 This is no placid, perfect, peace-filled mission Jesus enlisted his disciples into. This was a mission to infiltrate a curse-dealing world with God’s blessing.

But Jesus’ disciples were powered by the Holy Spirit. They threw themselves into the mission. It took its toll on them. Very few of them died of old age. But all of them died well. Changed. They staked their lives on the difference Jesus Christ makes in this world. They focused their lives on declaring that difference to all who cared to listen, and more than a few who didn’t.

 We who have been baptized follow in the footsteps of those first disciples. We who have been baptized have been drafted into that mission.

 We who have been baptized have been yanked out of those baptismal waters and thrust into a tired world, and charged to live in this world in a different way.

We’re freed to live under God’s kingdom rule.

 We’re molded into Christ-shaped people – equipped to be people of generosity, of compassion, of courage, of truth, of integrity, of patience.

 We’re trained to skip over questions such as, “What’s best for me?” or “What do I want to do?” And go directly to more pressing questions, like, “What action best honors God and serves our neighbor? What would Jesus have us do?”

 Those are difficult questions. And they can get us into trouble. It’s no wonder we so often attempt to go AWOL from life in God’s mission. But try as we might, we can’t go back again.

 I remember after last summer’s devastating flood, seeing in the newspaper a picture of a distressed man snarling at officials because they wouldn’t yet let him return to inspect the damage to his evacuated home.

 I suppose he eventually got to go home. But in the aftermath of flood, fire, hurricane, or typhoon, hundreds of people can’t go home again. There’s no home to return to. The past is gone, and everything has changed.

 That’s the reality for us who have been baptized, too. As Eugene Petersen’s stunning version of Paul’s words to the Romans puts it, [The Message, Romans 6.1-3]: *If we’ve left the country where sin is sovereign, how can we still live in our old house there? Or didn’t you realize we packed up and left there for good? That is what happened in baptism. When we went under the water, we left the old country of sin behind; when we came up out of the waters, we entered into the new country of grace – a new life in a new land!*

 We who have been baptized live in a new land. We can’t go home again. We live under the laws of God’s kingdom now. And God is as persistent in our lives as that leak in the roof which just keeps dripping water, no matter what you try to do to stop it.

Whether you were baptized by dunking, sprinkling, pouring, or a drop of water traced on your head -- when you were baptized, your old self was drowned.

You were fitted with a gleaming new Christ-shaped, blessed self.

And now you’re walking dripping wet. You can’t dry off.

So, you take your wet footsteps out wherever you go – testimony as to what God has done to you. And what God has done for the world.

That’s the mission into which you’ve been drafted.

That’s your mission – whether you choose to accept it. Or not.