

**“HOW BAPTISM SAVES YOU”**

***1 Peter 3:18-22***

Sermon by Mack Dennis, Pastor

I came home from the Ash Wednesday service this week, not yet having heard about the Ash Wednesday massacre. Then I saw the news. The old, horrible, heart-rending news. Seventeen dead in Florida. The worst mass shooting in a school since Sandy Hook. I saw the videos the students had taken during the lockdown. Law enforcement clearing rooms. Students' voices cracking with fear.

And again, I could feel the fuel kindling down in the marrow of my bones. The deep slow burn that comes with the indwelling of the spirit of God, but which I confess I sometimes confuse with the ancient embers of an Irish temper. But this felt like the same burning in my bones I felt after Las Vegas. And Newtown. And Virginia Tech. And on and on it goes—a parade of horrors. Don't you have that burning feeling inside? The kind Jeremiah spoke of when he said, “Whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, ‘Violence and destruction!’ But if I do not mention the word of the LORD, or speak anymore in his name, then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in and I cannot” (Jer. 20:8-9).

And I cannot. I had prepared to preach today about how baptism saves us. It was to be a sermon on the tell-tale signs of salvation, an offering of how to recognize the ways baptism transforms a person from immersion onward. It can wait for another day. Because today, preaching from the same text, with a similar premise, I want to ask whether baptism can save us from this plague that besets us. Can baptism save us from this violence? If Christianity is going to be taken seriously in this country, we Christians must ask the right questions, so that we'll be able to shape our life together in ways that address matters of life and death.

So, I ask, can baptism save us from this violence? Is there a baptism of the Holy Spirit, together with water, that does more than assure us of our individual forgiveness and salvation? Peter says, “Baptism...now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience.” In other words, baptism is not a mere cleansing initiation rite, but a life-changing event. Something happens to you when you're baptized. If I could re-translate this text, it would read this way: Now baptism saves you—not in a superficial way, but as an intense turning toward God-consciousness.” Baptism flips on the switch of our being transformed by the renewing of our minds.

It is only *this* baptism that can save us and our nation from the violence to which we've become accustomed. This word for *save* appears across the New Testament. It means to be rescued, to be kept safe and sound. In some contexts of Jesus' healing miracles, it's also translated “to be made well.” It's the classic, weighty word we use when we speak of God's salvation, saving us from sin. And, as is so often the case, here in its grammatical form, it is something in the process of happening.

Peter says, “Baptism...now saves you.” But in America, one of the most baptized nations in the world, there are more graves for people killed by gunfire since 1968 than there are graves for all American war dead, from the American Revolution to today.<sup>1</sup> So I ask whether the baptism with which so many have been baptized is merely an inactive coursing of water over the skin, or a truly saturating, transformational sacrament that leads to a good life and a good society?

A couple of weeks ago several families in our congregation were touched by the suicide of a close friend. A young man, married, two young children, friends of our children. One of God’s precious children battling that mysterious and terrible disease called depression. So many of us have been touched by suicides in our families and among our friends. Nearly two-thirds of the tens of thousands of gun related deaths in our country each year are suicides. This just doesn’t happen in other countries. Can baptism save us from this? Is there anything a society can do—a country that is still, for the most part, constituted of people who have been baptized?

Several years before I became a high school freshman, there was a shooting in the main hallway at the school where I would eventually attend. Someone was being bullied. He brought a gun to school. Shot the bully, but thankfully didn’t kill him. For four years, every time I walked down that hallway, I thought about it. When I started, there was a kid at the high school who was being bullied but who also was a bully in his own right. He once talked about how easy it would be to make a gun out of wooden parts and sneak it past a metal detector. It still surprises me that he never showed up somewhere with a homemade gun and opened fire. What could baptism do about any of this?

The young man who committed murder on Wednesday was on everybody’s mind. People saw something and said something. But it didn’t save Parkland School. Social services visited him, but they couldn’t save Parkland School. The teachers led their lockdown drills with precision, and this probably saved many. But it didn’t save 17 people. The young man had been reported to the FBI, but the FBI didn’t save Parkland School. So, if “see something say something” can’t save us, if Social services can’t save us, if lockdown drills can’t save us, if the FBI can’t save us, *can baptism save us?* Peter says, “Baptism...now saves you.” Well, Peter we appreciate that but we’ve got a lot of baptized people around this country, but we can’t seem to figure this out. So, Peter, do you have any other suggestions?

Then Peter gives us a hint. In this very strange line of our passage today, Peter does give us a lead. He says that Jesus was “put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison.” What could this mean? Jesus went to some strange spirit realm and preached? Some interpreters think so. Other interpreters, like the notable theologian David Bentley Hart, have shown that this has to do with demonic powers and principalities. They began as fallen angels, who—Christian tradition holds—became loosed in the world as evil spirits, demons, idols and ideologies. One of these to whom Jesus went and preached was, according to the Book of Enoch, the fallen angel Azazel. Azazel was the demon who was said to have taught human beings how to make weapons, jewelry, and cosmetics.

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<sup>1</sup> This statistic, from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, was popularized in a Nicholas Kristof column from 2015, and has since been further examined and verified by Politifact and Snopes.

This reveals what a great and terrible power we're up against, and how important baptism is in light of this great power. This isn't merely a so-called "political issue," but a spell that has been cast over our nation by powers and principalities that have plagued us in many and various ways since our founding. This is what we're truly up against. Not a specific political party, for both of our political parties have blood on their hands. This isn't just about the NRA. Or just about the weapons manufacturers, or 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment interpretations, or mental health care, or bump stocks, or all the things we bandy about on facebook and twitter and the op-ed pages. It's all included, of course. But the root of it all is Azazel, the demonic idea that violence—not baptism—is what really works. That violence—not baptism—is what really saves us. Azazel says, "I see you have enemies. You're going to need some weapons."

Have you ever seen the insides of a hellfire missile? It looks like something a James Bond villain would invent. How can we expect an end to these shootings when, as King said, we allow our technology to outrun our theology?

One of Azazel's favorite things to do in the wake of these shootings is offer thoughts and prayers. He doesn't want to be exposed. So he hides behind domesticated, religious language.

As those who've been baptized, we've already been given thoughts and prayers to say. So I'd like to call us back to the thoughts and prayers of the baptized, the language which, when it saturates, and changes us, transforming us by the renewing of our minds, has power to save us. Would anybody like to hear some thoughts and prayers?

Azazel's not going to like this because Azazel does not like lament. Lament expresses pain. It disrupts our numbness and exposes the truth. These will not be Azazel-approved thoughts and prayers because these thoughts and prayers remind us that Jesus Christ sits at the right hand of God the Father and all authorities and powers are subject to Him.

The first thought and prayer that comes to mind is Psalm 22: "My God, my God. Why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far away from the words of my groaning? I call on you by day, and you do not answer, and at night, but I find no rest."

Another thought and prayer comes from Psalm 2: "God sits in the heavens and laughs...The kings and the authorities devise their plans, but God stands back and laughs. He has them in derision. Then he speaks to them in his wrath."

Yet another thought and prayer comes from Psalm 46: "See what desolations God has brought on the earth! He bends the bow and shatters the spear, and burns the chariots with fire. Be still and know that I am God!"

But there is one last thought and prayer, which is also the sum of good news for us today, to comfort us in these dark times. It comes from Psalm 37. "Do not fret because of the wicked. Do not be envious of wrong doers, for they will soon fade like the grass, and wither like the

green herb. Trust in the Lord and do good so you will live in the land and enjoy security. Take delight in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart.

Yet a little while and the wicked will be no more. Though you look diligently for their place, they will not be there. The meek shall inherit the land, and delight in abundant prosperity. The Salvation of the Righteous is from the Lord. He is their refuge in the time of trouble. The Lord helps them, and He rescues them, and He saves them from the wicked, because they take refuge in Him.

These are thoughts and prayers for the baptised, and these, made manifest in baptized flesh, will be what saves us.

