

“Immersed”  
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky  
1st Sunday after the Epiphany – 9 & 10 January 2016

Page after page, hour after hour, with pen in hand to mark the best part, the mind absorbs, reflects, critiques. Nearby a voice murmurs, indistinct and seemingly distant, until the reader emerges from his immersion and profoundly utters, “Huh?” The voice, belonging in my case to Stephanie, now clear and crisp, says, “You didn’t hear a word I said, did you?” “No dear, sorry. Could you repeat that?”

Perhaps this has happened to you. It might have been at work or while doing a hobby, engrossed in the job at hand, or during a stimulating conversation with a friend, the coffeehouse chatter unnoticed. Then the knock on the door or the phone rings and the flows ceases, focus wavers, and that marvelous experience of immersion ceases.

That’s where many people spend much of their time: up on the surface, safe from the depths, where we can easily lose our sense of purpose, distracted and consumed by lesser concerns. We worry about what others might think or say about us. Life becomes a series of random, fragmented events. We strain for control, but find ourselves out of our element, sensing that we belong elsewhere. And we do. For we are creatures, like the fish of the sea, meant to stay immersed.

Specifically, God wants us to stay immersed in baptism. In fact, the word baptism comes from a Greek word that means immerse. But immersed in what? Unlike fish, we cannot stay submerged under water very long and survive. Some have taken the word baptism literally, believing that the rite of baptism only works if someone is dunked into a river or a basin placed behind the pulpit, but this misses the point.

Baptism is the sacrament of initiation into the Body of Christ, an outward and visible expression of our inward acceptance of God's unconditional love. Far from being a singular event, baptism is a way of life, an immersion into faith, a faith that forms a bond between God and us, a bond forged by the fire of the Holy Spirit. The initiation inaugurates a covenant with God, a contract of sorts in which we get a great bargain. And God wants us to dwell in the depths of that mystery. God wants us immersed in baptism, not through a quantity of water but with a quality of covenant.

God's side of the deal is very generous. We receive renewal of life, the forgiveness of sin, a host of spiritual gifts, and hope for life everlasting. In return, we promise to try: to try to practice our faith by receiving grace and sharing it with others as witnesses to God's love, justice, and mercy. We agree to try to pray and worship, to study scripture and exercise our spiritual gifts through ministry. We call our side of the bargain discipleship, a word that means follow, and the person we are called to follow is Jesus.

Why God would enter into such a one-sided arrangement, tilted decisively in our favor, will forever remain a mystery. Certainly, He would never make a killing on Wall Street. The only way to explain it is that God loves you, no matter what, for reasons that escape our understanding.

But it can be hard. Accepting grace means admitting we need it, and that doesn't come easy in a culture that reveres the rugged individualist, supposedly self-sufficient and proud of it. To be a disciple, a follower, chafes at our sense of independence. The baptismal covenant makes it clear that we depend on God, and every honest prayer confesses this basic truth.

When something is difficult, as discipleship often is, it tends to cause us anxiety, and when something makes us anxious, we either run away from it or fight it. There are many

temptations and distractions to help us surface from our immersion, and once on the surface, we can enjoy the illusion of being captain of our own little ship. We focus our energies away from the guiding purpose of our life, covenant with God, and pursue our own course in life, aimless as it might be. We sacrifice the wonders of those glorious depths and deep-six a covenant that asks much but always gives more.

However, we can stay immersed where we belong, at peace with God and ourselves. If you can get immersed in a book, you can get immersed in the Bible. It's got more murder, adultery, violence, betrayal and plot twists than the best popular fiction writer could hope to imagine. Even better, the Bible packs wisdom, not so much a daily guide to living as a framework from which a person can construct a wholesome life.

If you can immerse yourself in a conversation with a friend, to the exclusion of all else, you can immerse yourself in a conversation with God. There are days when it will feel a trifle one-sided, but if you listen closely enough – and if you listen with more than just your ears – you will hear the voice of God.

If you can get immersed in your work or your hobby, you can get immersed in ministry. In fact, your work or your hobby can become a ministry. There is no reason why the two should remain separate, because each can enhance the other. Doing the work of God can feel awfully risky sometimes, and there are costs involved, but the benefit to you and others cannot be calculated.

What it takes is remembrance and intention. Remember the knowledge that you are baptized. Say it first thing in the morning, if you like. The great Protestant reformer Martin Luther did. Before his feet hit the floor every morning, he would whisper, "I am a baptized child

of God.” Program your cell phone or wristwatch to blare out an alarm at some point in your day, and pause to whisper under your breath, “I am a baptized disciple of Jesus.”

Once you have remembered, set your intention to stay immersed and devote your attention to the practices that can help you stay immersed in the water and fire of baptism. When this proves challenging, seek the help of the Holy Spirit. Call out to her and beg that the distractions may cease so that you can simply get lost in the love of God. It sounds fantastic, and it is, as I’m sure each of you can attest, and to get more of that blessed sense of immersion, we need only devote our attention to the noble purposes set for us.

There will be times when we bob back up to the surface. It can’t be helped. Nobody’s perfect. But sink again. Sink again into the depths of God’s covenant. Sink again into the reverie of a disciplined life. Be baptized. Be immersed: wholly immersed in the water and fire of Christ’s life. Amen.