

“Taking the Plunge”

The television program called, *I Shouldn't Be Alive*, tells the stories of people caught in harrowing, near-death situations who somehow managed to survive.

Two American were on a scuba diving vacation in the South Pacific. Surfacing after a dive, they discovered that a strong current had taken them far from the boat. They waved and hollered to the crew, but were too far away to be heard. The crew looked hard but didn't see them. Running low on fuel the boat raced to port to get fuel and return a search boat for the divers.

The divers assured each other that help would arrive within an hour. The boat arrived at the site, but didn't see a trace of the divers, and for good reason. They were now seven miles away. The sun was setting and they knew the odds of surviving after dark weren't good. Predators owned the night. Fighting panic, they swam, hoping for the best. They had to swim slowly because of luminescent plankton that glowed when they stroked the water, leaving a path for sharks to follow.

They fought off a six-foot barracuda. They swam through a cloud of stinging jellyfish and afterward, they could barely move because of the toxins in their bloodstream. Taking turns holding each other, they were slipping into unconsciousness from exhaustion and poison in their blood. Somehow, they survived the night. But by now the hot sun, infection, and saltwater were breaking their skin down.

An island was four miles away. Hours later they were finally near shore, unaware that one of their feet were bleeding, leaving a blood trail. Then their worst fear materialized -- the dorsal fin of

an 18' great white shark. They had to get to shore but there was no beach. Big waves were pounding huge jagged rocks. They had been in the water 23 hours. They survived the night and a thirty-mile swim. All that was left to their story was one of two conclusions – they would either be eaten by the shark, or shredded on the rocks. Fortunately, they were given a third option when a small fishing boat appeared and saved them.

Christopher is twenty-six. He has a master's degree from Cornell in art and studied for a year in Rome. His talent was apparent when he was seven. I preached a sermon on baptism, and the children were asked to draw what they heard me say. I have Chris's picture in a file. He drew a man with hands tied behind him standing at the end of a plank. A sword point poked his back and below him a school of hungry sharks. I had to spend "extra" time working with Chris before he was baptized.

Our Old and New Testament ancestors were unsettled by big water. The ocean was home to the great sea monster, Leviathan. It's depths teamed with dangerous creatures and evil spirits, ready to devour poor souls who fell overboard.

God told Noah to build an ark because God's judgment was about to flood the earth. In the dark tale we see that ark tossed up and down, and pitched side to side by violent wind and waves. Like a tub toy floating on the watery chaos, the S.S. Noah held earth's sole survivors.

When the water receded, God made a covenant never to do such a thing again, and sealed it with a rainbow. We can destroy the earth if we want to, but its destruction isn't an option for God. The Bible also declares that the deep is the domain of God. Psalm 139 says, "If I take the rays of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, *even there* your hand will lead me and hold me."

Think a moment about Jesus and water. The first nine months of his visit to earth were spent floating in a watery womb. His first miracle was turning big jars of water into mighty fine wine. He asked a Samaritan woman for a drink from the well. He walked

on water. He sailed on it. He slept through storms on it. He told people to call him *Living Water* if they wanted. And a defining moment for Jesus happened in the water.

John was baptizing in the Jordan for repentance and forgiveness. As John foretold, Jesus showed up one day. It's been suggested that if Jesus had a personal coach -- somebody to help hone his image and tell him how to work the crowds, he would have skipped baptism. The coach would put Jesus on the bank, handing "*high fives*" and telling the baptized, "Way to go!" Instead, Jesus knelt with the sinners and took the plunge. Jesus, who was without sin, identified with our weakness.

In Mark's characteristic "*hurry up*" style, Jesus heard God's blessing, "You are my beloved Son," and the next moment was shoved into the desolate and dangerous wilderness. He fought heat and hunger by day and cold and howling beasts by night, and through it all he was tempted to deny his status as God's son. The Tempter said it was okay to satisfy his own hunger. He told Jesus to enter politics, and perform death-defying stunts to draw big crowds.

We typically take texts like this and whittle them down to a personal, private level. We ask how Jesus' baptism and temptation applies to temptations in my life. But Mark wasn't concerned with the struggles of individuals. He cared about the body. He was concerned with the struggles facing the Christian community of his day. What did their baptism mean living in a hostile world? How was the community of faith going to bear witness to Jesus' when the "powers that be" tried to erase it?

Baptism isn't a private act that simply seals our salvation and provides a ticket to heaven. Baptism *is* an occasion for joy. It is about saving, but more, it is about *sending*. Jesus hadn't dried off before he found himself battling adversaries in the desert. On the heels of God's blessing came Satan's testing.

If we're going to be followers of Jesus in this world, we're going to have a battle on our hands. This week on the website of the Fox Network's conservative talk show host, Shawn Hannity there

was a polling question that asked, “What is the best method for over-throwing the Obama administration and taking back the county?” 37% suggested secession. The option that received the most votes? Armed rebellion.

What is God doing to engage the powers? How do we witness to Jesus’ kingdom in the face of hatred? How do we witness to hope in a county with 16% unemployment? What solid alternative do we offer, now that we know our institutions of finance and commerce are crumbling? What do we say and do, surrounded as we are by a frightened, discouraged, broken, battered, spiritually homeless culture?

We are the community of God’s beloved. We’ve taken the plunge in the waters of baptism. We are the community of the saved, and therefore the community sent into the thick of a dark world. Yes, there will be adversity, discouragement, sharks, jellyfish, recession, and shrinking IRAs. But there will also be the rustling wings of angels caring for our community in the wilderness, just as the cared for Jesus.