

The Rev. T. Stewart Lucas  
Memorial Episcopal Church  
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Easter Vigil

During seminary I was lucky enough to get to travel to the Holy Land with one of the classes that I signed up for. And yes, I only signed up for the class because of the trip! Later on, when I got my final grade, I was cruelly punished for it, but that's not the point of this homily! I got to go to the Holy Land. And while we traveling we visited all of the important sites including those in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Jericho. But one of the side trips that sticks out in my mind tonight is our visit to the Dead Sea. You know that the Dead Sea is the one where you can float because of the special minerals in it.

Much to my dismay, our professor had not carved out any time for us to go swimming, or floating as it were. Our professor said we didn't really want to do that. But of course we did! So two of my buddies and I knew we had to get in the water. I mean, when else would we have the opportunity to get in the Dead Sea? So off our shoes and shirts came, and into the water we went. I have to tell you it is indeed the weirdest feeling you have ever experienced. You really do just kind of float on the surface of the water. And the water was very warm. Finally the bus was about to leave. We had to get out.

And when we walked out of the water, we had the weirdest stuff covering our bodies. As it turns out, the minerals that enable you to float on the water also create this slimy film on your skin as you exit the water! It was incredibly messy, and there were no showers to be found and we didn't have a change of clothes with us! Our professor was right, we didn't really want to get in the Dead Sea, but we did it. We weren't prepared for the ramifications.

Tonight we will renew our Baptismal Vows and welcome Josephine, Hannah and Rylee into the household of God. It is not unlike taking a dip in the Dead Sea. The thought of being baptized and the actual experience is wonderful, but being reborn with Christ will bring about some messy changes in your life. And sometimes we are unprepared for the ramifications of what it means to be reborn.

We seem to have tried to sanitize baptism, with our customs. We sprinkle your head now so as not to really mess up your hair. But of course Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan. I got to visit that place too while I was in the Holy Land. There aren't any beautifully carved marble fonts there. It's muddy in parts. You would come out pretty dirty if you jumped in. Being reborn with Christ and raised to new life with him isn't a very sanitizing experience.

Of course the human birthing process is not so easy either I hear. It is painful, but new life comes forth. What is our spiritual birth like? What does this mean? There is pain, struggle, water, sweat. No pain, no gain. We have to trust in God. God breathes that new life into us and gives us muscle and skin when we are only a pile of bones.

We may not want to go where that spirit leads us, but the waters of baptism engulf us and make us new again. We may not remember our human birth, and you may not remember your spiritual birth either. The second may not have happened in an instance. It is a gradual process of being reborn and made anew.<sup>i</sup>

There is another part to my Dead Sea swimming story though. As soon as we emerged from the water and returned to the bus full of classmates impatiently waiting on us, they wanted to know what it was like. What did those weird life-changing waters feel like?

After we are raised to new life with Christ, we have a responsibility to tell the story of the inner and outer change of our lives. What difference does it make in how we live? We vow to keep learning and teaching and breaking bread together. We vow to resist evil and repent when we give in. We vow to keep proclaiming the Gospel and keep loving everyone. And we promise to strive for justice and peace for all people. As it turns out, following through with those promises is not so clean cut either. In fact living out our baptismal vows will turn everything upside down in a messy way from time to time.

But the end is in no way a mess. The end is grace and eternal life, and people want to know what it feels like.

In this Easter Vigil liturgy we have heard the story of salvation history. And tonight we recommit ourselves to telling that story to these little ones that we baptize and to the entire world. That world that needs to know and experience the liberating love and grace of Jesus Christ.

And tonight what better way to recommit ourselves to truth, to Jesus, to the truth, to what we believe to be our history, than to renew our Baptismal Vows with Josephine, Hannah and Rylee. We commit to remaining in community and telling our children about the valley of the dry bones and the Spirit that gives them new life. We commit ourselves to sharing the story with those who do not know it that God earnestly desires to give us life and salvation through the Son, Jesus Christ. We keep on messing up and trying to do better, repenting and then proclaiming. We strive to love each other and seek the best for our neighbors, all of our neighbors. And we beg of the Holy Spirit to give us the grace and strength to do all of these things.

That grace comes in our community, and in our families, who keep telling the stories.

*I love to tell the story of unseen things above,  
Of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love.  
I love to tell the story, because I know 'tis true;  
It satisfies my longings as nothing else can do.*

*Refrain*

*I love to tell the story, 'twill be my theme in glory,  
To tell the old, old story of Jesus and His love.*

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<sup>i</sup> Women's Uncommon Prayers, p. 128.