

January 10, 2010
First Sunday after the Epiphany
The Very Rev. William Lupfer

In Canada...province of Ontario...there's a river called the Missinaibi. It flows north, through the North Woods into James Bay. It starts with a lake, about 12 miles long, and that's where where canoe adventurers start from. There's a group of highschool young men, who banded together to go with some leaders, on this river. What they did was, they traveled across the lake first, and then got into the river, and they were intending to go about 340 miles down that river. The river had a lot of whitewater, so they stopped at the first rapids, and practiced. Practice makes perfect. They took their gear out, and ran the rapids...about 6 or 8 times...they practiced. They had practiced alot at paddling in a lake, but this was sort of the final exam. And then at the end, the counselors sent the kids through--without their boat, and without their paddle--just with their preservers. Because anyone in whitewater needs to know how to manage, if they get thrown out of the boat. So the boys did that too...they went through the rapids, once or twice, or three times.

There was a young guy named Bruce, who just didn't quite feel comfortable, going through the rapids yet. So he asked Tucker, the leader, if he could go one more time. And Tucker said sure. So Bruce came down, and he did the one thing you really can't do when you're in whitewater, without the boat. You can't let your feet go down. You've got to keep your feet up, and sort of skim the surface, so nothing hits you. Bruce let his feet down, and right then--unbeknownst to anyone at the time--there was an old logging bridge that had fallen, and submerged. Bruce's "wigwam"-- those big thick wool socks--hit a bolt that was anchored into the river underwater. It wrapped around his sock, and the force of the water pushed Bruce forward. Tucker was there, the leader, ...just close, and he threw the rope, which safety would have you do... And Bruce tried to grab the rope, but couldn't. And then the water pushed him, and held him there. And this 15 or 16-year old boy drowned right there, right in front of all of them. You can just imagine the horror they must have felt. They had to sleep there that night...because it was wilderness, even at that point. And then they brought in rescue people the next day...it took them seven hours, to remove Bruce's body from that horrible tragic bolt that grabbed him.

I remember when Ken Bryant, the camp director, pulled me aside to tell me that, about Bruce. And I sat there looking out the window, as Ken was telling me that. And I realized...just the year before...I had a profound experience of spiritual awakening on that exact same river. It was the first time, I think, in my life...late teens...that I realized how incredible joy can be so close to deep authentic pain and tragedy. And isn't that true about life itself? We live a life, where there is so much joy, and so much tragedy, and they're all mixed in together! If you think about it, life is a dangerous thing! None of us gets out alive. Life kills all of us--every one of us...will go, to our grave. And so we live where...we're cheek by jowl, with joy and tragedy...and it's hard to make sense of it sometimes. A place that can be so meaningful to you, can be a place of absolute tragedy to another family. And then to you, as well.

I have a picture on my desk upstairs in my office, of a lotus flower. Because lotus flowers bloom out of the muck. It's a spiritual symbol in the East...that even the muck can release beauty. And in fact, most of us are grounded in that muck, from time to time. I know you and me well... Even out of that muck, we can blossom...and we can show part of God's beauty. That rhythm of life in our Christian understanding, is called the Pascal Mystery...the dying and rising...Jesus going into death through the cross and the grave...and then awakening again. And as Christians, we see that as a rhythm of life - that Pascal Mystery. We rehearse it, and remember it...every Sunday, every Holy Week, every great trinium,...from his arrest on Maundy Thursday...to his rising on Easter. And we do it in our lives, through the events and changes and chances of our lives. It's my privilege, to see you go through that Pascal Mystery...that absolute diminishment...that doesn't stop there, but you follow the pathway of God's pulling you forward...into the healing of new life. And we each do that, constantly.

In the Gospel today, we hear about Jesus doing that...at his baptism. We are not told why he went there, so we can imagine. I imagine Jesus was drawn there...sort of pulled there. Let's go check it out. It's not like he had a daytimer, and put "John" on his calendar..or in his blackberry. He was drawn there. And then John was there to welcome him...his cousin..."c'mon cuz - you too". And Jesus maybe checked it out and tried it. He went down to that river. Baptism for him, was an occasion of that lotus flower blossoming...of that release coming out of a tomb-like place, into the full embrace of God. And we hear it in the voice of God: "You are my Beloved. My Son, with you I am well pleased."

Jesus walks the way ahead of us...and invites us through his actions--as told in Scripture today--to do the same in our lives. To not just witness the baptism here of seven-month Ella, who is having a nice meal right now... Not only to witness, but to live that reality, and to go to those places ourselves...to find "John" for **us**. Who is your "John?"...as he was to Jesus...inviting Jesus to that place of belovedness. What is that context? It may be the River Jordan, for some of you. I've been there, and it is certainly powerful. But hopefully, that's not the only one...it's pretty far away. So, where is that sacred river for you? Is it water? Is it relationship? Is it both? Hopefully, it's many places. I think Jesus' example today, invites us to live that Pascal Mystery, so that we can enter that dying and diminishment, with the hope and firm conviction that we will move through it, and will be invited into that new life.

I recently read an article that talked about that, in words that were a little different than the "churchy" words that I'm using right now. So let me shift...because Jesus practiced Sabbath in his day, challenging us to practice Sabbath in our day. And imagine that Jesus, in his Sabbath practice, invited people into a daily discovery of the Pascal Mystery. And imagine that Jesus...part of the reason he was in contention, with the authorities of his time...was because the authorities wanted to hoodwink the people and tell them, "all of your Pascal Mystery...all of your opening to God, is tied to this altar...and I stand at the altar, so let me control your spiritual life." If you only practice Sabbath here, then there's a lack of control that you have. But if you practice Sabbath here...and head out into the world, and see Sabbath there...and you go through that mysterious rhythm of dying and rising there too, and practice Sabbath there...then you

have the fullness of joy. Then you can practice your faith everywhere. Then the mix...the cheek by jowl...the blossom of the flower out of the muck...that can happen all over the place. And your openness to God can be seen in many places. You're not so controlled and limited.

So our goal here, is to work with you--and ourselves--in a way, that we can practice Sabbath outside. So let's change language, and use more modern language. I recently read a study, that was talking about Sabbath rest, I think. Although the study discovered that most of us are "pleasure-procrastinators." Imagine Sabbath as pleasure. Now you don't hear this much in church, so enjoy it. (laughter) Imagine Sabbath as pleasure, and God is inviting you into a playful pleasure. But you've become habituated to procrastinate that pleasure,,,because being spiritual means you don't have much fun, right? If you want to be mature, you need a pressed look on your face. and not be very happy. We've all drunk that Kool-aid, and its time to let it go. So, each of you, because I've read the study, and I know I'm one of them too, are basically pleasure-procrastinators. It works like this: when you look at the future, and you imagine forward...you think about time and money, because those are two really important things, right? You know that money is tight now, and probably in the future. And the study I just read says that most of us are pretty reasonable about money that way. We know it's tight now, for what we hope for, and it'll probably be tight then. So we plan the future well, that way.

But we don't do very well with time. We know, now, that time is tight. But somehow in the future, we're going to have a lot of time. And I'll reveal a little secret for church. We know this about you. So, you'll notice how many times we recruit you for something six months from now. And you say, "Sure, I'll do that." And six months from now...you're as busy as ever! Your time is tight then, too. What we do, in that way...the study tells us...is that we start to trick ourselves, into habitually denying pleasure, or Sabbath. We begin to build this image, up ahead...where everything is going to be perfect...and we're going to have the best _____ (fill in the blank), ever. So we don't do it now...not now...and not now...because always...ahead.

It reminds me of my favorite folk-singer, Bob Dylan, who says: "Someday, everything's gonna' be different, when I paint my masterpiece." This illusion...that someday in the future, it will be great, and much better than now. So we deny and avoid. There are a few spiritual practices that you can do, in this conundrum...to let yourself open into full Sabbath joy...into life now...to bloom in the muck. And they're very technical, so stay with me.

The first practice is this: If you have a gift card at home, spend it! (laughter) Don't do what I did...and take the gift card, and put it in a perfect place...and lose track of where it is. Spend it. Go home this week, take someone to dinner. Go wherever it is. Let it take you there...let that be your River Jordan this week. Here's another real high-tech spiritual practice for our day. Do you have any airline miles? That you're holding for that perfect time when you'll never be able to go? Sign up now! Go home, don't procrastinate. Let that be a Sabbath rest for you. Go use some of those miles! You own them. They're a gift to God. And they're a gift to you, from God. There are little

ways, that we don't have to deny pleasure. And for Christians, that means...we practice Sabbath. When we deny Sabbath...joy with our family and friends...when we deny that, we deny God. Imagine for a moment, that God's experience is that being like a jewel, waiting to be found. God is a jewel, waiting to be found. God knows how wonderful God can be for you. But you hurry past. You're too busy. And God is like that jewel, saying: "I'm here! I'm here! Notice me!"

Maybe during the baptism that we have this morning, you can imagine the ways God is calling you to the Jordan River...and to pleasure, to Sabbath, to a new blossom...out of the muck of this life.