

Breaking the Surface

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Romans 6:1-11, Mark 1:4-11

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I recently overheard a conversation between Philoxenos and Anne Lamott. This was quite an extraordinary thing, given that Philoxenos lived in Syria in the sixth century AD and Anne Lamott lives in southern California in the 21st century AD. Philoxenos has written about the nature of God, the creator of all life. Anne Lamott has written about the character of God, the soother of our troubled souls. Philoxenos was a monk and early Christian bishop, who stressed that Jesus Christ was the divine Son of God. Anne Lamott, a reformed alcoholic and novelist and of late Presbyterian apologist, writes columns and does radio interviews in which she is routinely questioned on her beliefs about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. A while ago, she commented that she gets a lot of crank calls – half of whom think Jesus was just a nice man and New Age kind of guy, while the other half insist she's not a real Christian at all and that she's going to rot in hell for all eternity. She says, "I thank all my cranky callers for sharing and then I say, 'You know the difference between you and God? God *never* thinks he's you' before I [hang up and] get on with celebrating."¹

Philoxenos and Anne Lamott were talking about baptism, the sacrament of the church involving water – preferably water that's not too cold, not too hot, and in Presbyterian churches, not too much. Next to the air we breathe, water is one of the most important things in our lives. Our bodies contain more water than any other substance. Over three-fourths of the earth is covered by it. It serves as our first cradle, surrounding us before our birth. Yet water is associated with both wombs and tombs, having the power to both nurture and destroy life. Noah waterproofed the planks in his ark, as the floods rose over the face of the earth and his floating menagerie barely survived the watery deluge. Moses brought the Israelites out of Egypt through the parted waters of the Red Sea, before lowering his staff and drowning the pursuing Egyptian army in a tumult of deadly, crashing waves.

Baptism is a sacrament of initiation. It marks a time of entry, of welcome and restoration and new beginnings. Preacher Will Willimon has commented that when you join Rotary or Kiwanis, you are given a handshake and a lapel pin. When you join the church, they half drown you in water.² Quite an interesting contrast.

Baptism is a public event, an act which ritualizes transformation. We proclaim to the world how things have changed, that we now belong to the one named Christ. The old is gone; the new has come once we wade in the waters of baptism. But how shall we talk about this transformation? How do we tell a faith story about change offered to all people without turning it into something formulaic that simply doesn't match the experiences of most people?

Anne Lamott prefers to keep things simple and talks straight-forwardly about her own journey of faith. As she puts it, “[Look,] I got sober against all odds, and then I started hanging out with people who were trying to get sober too; and over time I got to watch a number of the walking dead come back to life – as I came back to life. So I believe in the basic Christian message that life happens, death happens and then new life happens. I believe in resurrection. So sue me. Or go read something else.”³

But Philoxenos insisted that we need some sort of metaphor to capture the core idea connecting all our individual stories. So he talked about how unborn children are already perfect and fully constituted in their nature, having all their senses and limbs. But they cannot make full use of their senses and limbs because, in the womb, they cannot strengthen or develop them completely.⁴ Likewise, all things have their season, so there is a time to be unborn – to exist in the comfort of the social womb. There is a time to be sustained by the warmth and all-encompassing reality of life’s collective myth. It may mean cramped quarters and provide no distant horizon to strive for, but it is generally safe and focused on us and our immediate needs.

But there also comes a time to be born, to spiritually emerge into a new identity liberated from the suffocating womb of myth and prejudice and intense self-focus. By God’s grace, our old way of life dies. We emerge from our enslavement to self and are able to truly consider and serve the needs of others. We move beyond a life of flesh into a new life of flesh and spirit. We confront our deepest fears about death and burst through them, as if delivered down a narrow birth canal into the bright light and expansive vision that insists death is not the defining reality of our life. Baptism is our sacrament of this spiritual birth.

Anne Lamott likes Philoxenos’ imagery. But for her, the problem is that we don’t consciously remember our own birth. Intellectually we can see the parallels between physical birth and spiritual re-birth. But our fleshly body that defined us in the womb remains our dominant focus long after we emerge blinking and mewling into the bright light of the delivery rooms. What ends up happening is that we are happy to walk through the parted waters of the Red Sea, so long as we can take all our luggage with us. You can wash us with baptism waters, but don’t ask us to wear different clothes or lead different lives once we’ve dried off. Or, as Anne Lamott put it, “I think they should let you have your true authentic healed self *and* the cool car. I think you should get to have an awareness of eternity *and* the buns of steel.”⁵

Lamott reminds us that Jesus didn’t come to patch up our old raggedy lives but rather to give us new life. She says, you can’t get to the good stuff without killing off the old stuff. That’s why for her, the more accessible way to describe the baptism moment of transformation is to compare it to swimming underwater until all your air is gone, and you pop your head out of the water to break the surface and fill your lungs with wonderful, life-giving air.

Swimmers have mentioned to me that it is possible to dive down so deep that you can't see well and you get disoriented, unable to tell which direction is up. It is possible then to panic and convince yourself that you're drowning and that you'll never get back to the surface in time. Your lungs ache and pound; your heart races. Just as you're sure you've exhausted the last ounce of oxygen in your lungs, you break the water's surface and, splashing, gulping, you feel the air rush into your body and remember what it means to be truly alive.

Like Philoxenos' unborn children, we can survive in dark waters for quite a while. We can hold our breath and try to get by on our own resources. Or worse, we spend our lives swimming around in dark waters of destructive behavior, addiction, depression and fear. Far too many lives are wasted swimming below the surface, groping in the darkness beneath the waves; lives seemingly as brief as a lungful of oxygen and spent with no horizon and no true hope ever in sight.

Baptism calls us to a different way of life. Yes, it is like being born again. Yes, it is like breaking the water's surface and breathing freely at last. Yes, it is like being newly washed and given a second, third, or one-hundredth chance to get it right. But it is even more profound than that. The apostle Paul put it best: *"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life."* (Romans 6:3-4)

We swim our lives away underwater fearing that moment when our breath finally gives out and death takes us at last. We swim fast and anxious; or we swim slowly, lost and going in circles. We take our pulse; we focus on ourselves; we push away other swimmers who somehow might be a threat to us and our watery plans. But even as we fear and try to avoid death, we're told that Christ has already experienced it for us – experienced and overcome it. He suffered and died, yes, but then by being raised from the dead, death no longer has dominion over him. Or over us – for by grace we are baptized into his death and resurrection. He broke the water's surface once and for all, bursting forth on Easter gasping for air, shaking off the watery grave, while all of creation rejoiced.

And we rejoice – for all the deaths we experience, all necessary and unnecessary losses, the fears and failings, the limited vision and doubting spirits – are all pushed aside. We breathe freely again. We fill our lungs and step away from our soggy, raggedy ol' lives. We live and breathe as if for the first time, dead to addiction, dead to fear and anxiety and anger – for they have no lasting hold on us any more. We are dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Philoxenos has warned that we work hard at believing we are self-sufficient, thinking that we have no needs we cannot immediately fulfill on our own – just like a perfect-yet-oh-so-limited unborn child in the watery womb. Anne Lamott talks with joy about breaking the water's surface and filling her lungs with God's grace, remembering that the Easter promise is also for her. In baptism we are buried with Christ so that we might

be raised with Christ; dead to sin but alive to God fully, completely, wonderfully. And as we emerge up through the baptism waters, the voice says to us as well, "This is my beloved Child, with whom I am well pleased." Take a deep breath. Look around. Through Christ, in Christ, everything is now changed. It's great to be alive.

AMEN

¹ Anne Lamott, "Breaking the Surface", WORD BY WORD, Salon (April 1, 1999).

² William Willimon, Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized, p. 32.

³ Anne Lamott, op cit.

⁴ Thomas Merton, "Rain and the Rhinoceros", Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master, p. 394.

⁵ Anne Lamott, op cit.

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