

Rescue Mission

Luke 3:15-22

The Baptism of Our Lord; Series C

If you were standing on the shoreline on December 29, 1807, off from the coast of Cornwall, England, you would have witnessed the shipwreck of the *Anson*, a 64-gun ship of the Royal Navy. In comparison to other infamous shipwrecks, the damage and the loss of life was perhaps minimal. The estimates are from sixty to one-hundred and ninety lives lost. The significance of this particular shipwreck is what it inspired one particular observer of this shipwreck to do.

A man named Henry Trengrouse was a native of Helston, England, a coastal town in the region of Cornwall, near the location of the shipwreck. On that day in 1807 Trengrouse stood on the shoreline and witnessed the sinking of the *Anson*. Distressed by the loss of life caused by the difficulties in attaching lines to the wreck in order to save the stranded seamen, he devoted his life to developing life-saving equipment. One particular device that Trengrouse developed was the breeches buoy.

The breeches buoy resembles a round flotation device with a leg harness attached. The flotation device and leg harness is attached by a rope to a pulley. The whole contraption is then attached to another rope that is shot across the surf to shipwrecks using a rocket apparatus. As a result a zip line is created on which the rescuer can travel to save stranded victims. On his deathbed in 1854 Trengrouse allegedly told his son, "If you live to be as old as I am, you will find my rocket apparatus along our shores." This became true as the breeches buoy was used in many occasions to save lives.

One man that was captivated by the breeches buoy was the famous painter, Winslow Homer. After being swept up in the realism movement at the time of the late 19th century, Homer traveled to a small English fishing village on the coast of the North Sea. While there he was able to witness human ingenuity and heroics at work with the use of the breeches buoy to rescue shipwrecked victims. On another



shoreline thirty years after the death of Trengrouse, with his brushstrokes, Homer preserved the significance and impact of the breeches buoy life saving device in his painting, *The Life Line*. An impact that ripples on even today as the Philadelphia Museum of Art just finished displaying his piece as the center of an exhibition titled, "Shipwreck!," exploring the making and meaning of the American image of rescue.

In his painting, Homer depicts a coast guardsman, with the help of the breeches buoy, rescuing an unconscious woman. In painting this real life scene, Homer emphasizes realism, heroics, and human ingenuity. With the help of one man's invention, driven by the resolve and determination to save the lives of those in great danger and peril, another man plunges into the cold waters of the North Sea on a rescue mission. And still another captures the moment for an entire world to see.

Today in the church we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus in the midst of the season of Epiphany. As we were reminded last week on the Day of the Epiphany of our Lord, in the season of Epiphany we display the unwrapped gift of the Christ child for all to see. As the church, we shine forth the light of the world for the sake of the nations and seek to bring them into the household of God. By taking some time to observe the Baptism of Jesus we also remember that our God sent his only son into this world on a rescue mission. The sinless Son of God plunged into the waters of the Jordan River as the beginning of a mission to seek and save the lost. And the four Evangelists capture the moment for the entire world to hear, read, and believe.

All four of the Evangelists record the baptism of Jesus to some degree. But this morning we consider the words of St. Luke. In our Gospel reading Luke begins by telling the readers that the people at the time of Jesus were actually expecting a rescue mission. They were looking for the Messiah to come and save them. The Jewish people were looking for the military Messiah to deliver them by sword from the oppressive Romans. They were looking for their Messiah to restore the land and the temple for them. They were a people in expectation. But they were expecting the wrong kind of Messiah.

The expectant Jews that St. Luke writes about were expecting the wrong kind of Messiah because they did not fully understand the danger from which they needed to be saved. There is a popular television show called *Once Upon A Time*. The show gives a fresh, modern spin on classic fairy tales and weaves together the stories of all the characters. Early on in the series the viewers learn an interesting twist with the little red riding hood character. Every full moon granny and little red riding hood worked with great effort to protect themselves from the big bad wolf. Then, one full moon night, little red riding hood discovers that *she* is the big bad wolf. It's a great twist! The problem is in her. She needs to be rescued from herself.

God sends his only son into this world on a rescue mission. The people were receiving a baptism for repentance. All of the people that went into the water were confessing their sins, desiring to turn from them, and turn to their Lord. As St. Luke records it, *only after* all the people were baptized (3:21) does Jesus, their Messiah plunge into the water. By doing so he shows just what kind of Messiah he is going to be. He is going to be the world's Messiah, God in the flesh, who identifies with his very own creation. By going into the waters of the Jordan after all of the people took a plunge, admitting their sin, he shows just what kind of rescue mission he is on. He is identifying with sinners in order to be our sin bearer. God, the Father validated his mission and gave his voice of approval, "This is my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased" (3:22). God, the Holy Spirit equipped him for his mission by coming down like a dove and resting upon Jesus.

Perhaps at times you find yourself in the position of Henry Trengrouse. You are off at a safe observing distance watching the shipwreck. You see friends, family, or others making a shipwreck of their lives. You see them flailing their arms helplessly as they try to find the answer to their money problems at the bottom of a slot machine. You see them reaching desperately for a floatation device as they attach their identity to having the latest and greatest electronic device, the nicest looking car, or the biggest house. You see them trying to save themselves and swim to safety by jumping from significant other to significant other seeking meaning and security. You see them trying to keep their head above water as they search for an escape from the stress and a relief from the anxiety at the bottom of a bottle. You observe people who have wrecked their lives and are lost. And you stand at a distance distressed by the loss of life. And you want them to be rescued.

Perhaps at times you find yourself in the position of Winslow Homer. You are able to witness the rescue of people in distress. A child is led to the baptismal font and reclaimed as God's own. An adult hears, believes, and is transformed by the message of a Messiah who plunges into a broken, sinful, evil world to identify with sinners and take their guilt upon himself in order to seek and save the lost.

Regardless of whether we can relate to Trengrouse or Homer, our God would have us daily identifying with the story that St. Luke has to tell. He would have us recognizing the big bad wolf inside us all. He would have us see the reality of our lost-ness and separation without the rescue mission of the Messiah who comes to identify with the lost, the distressed, the shipwrecked—the sinner. He would have us returning daily to the waters of our baptisms by remembering that God in Christ rescued us by giving us the life saving work of his cross for the forgiveness of our sins and the cleansing of guilt. He would have us returning daily to the waters of our baptisms by remembering that God in Christ gave us the fruit of his resurrection victory by defeating the enemies of sin and death that separate us from him. He would have us return to those waters daily in repentance so that we can confess our sin, sink it to the bottom, and rise rescued, restored once again to the image of God in Christ.

This is the rescue mission work you can expect from your God. Now that you are rescued and restored to his image; Now that you are one who finds your identify, meaning, and security in no one else but in this God alone; now you go forth to live as one who is rescued. And in your faithful living you are proclaiming and giving witness to the one who loves every human being so much that he once plunged into the waters for them. Amen.