

Blessed in the Wilderness

After my father died in 2017, I undertook a task that many are familiar with. It was the challenge of going through so much of the "stuff" that my dad had left behind.

Clothes, books, awards, papers, photos had to be sorted through. Some of it would be thrown out. Part of it would be given away. A portion, I would keep.

Tucked away on the bottom of a desk drawer, I discovered a black and white photo of an infant dressed in a white gown. It was dated April 30th.

I quickly realized that it was a photo of my baptism.

Rummaging through my dad's stuff got me thinking about his life, my life and all the things our parents give us. In that moment I felt grateful for what my parents had given me: their love, our home, all the opportunities for education-even grateful for our imperfect family. It is in an imperfect family that we get our first lessons on how to live in a very imperfect world.

Gazing at that black and white snapshot, I am profoundly grateful for what my parents gave me through baptism. They helped open a door to a community, a faith that challenges me to be a better person.

Many of the other things my parents gave me are gone: The carefully chosen Christmas gifts from decades past probably sit somewhere at the bottom of a municipal landfill; the family gatherings and vacations are but memories. What my parents bequeathed to me in the waters of baptism lives on through the many seasons of life. It is grace.

At times, that community of faith, the church, has felt like being on a giant boat, an ark, as described in Sunday's First and Second Readings. Together, we ride the waters of time, sometimes tossed about by crises and scandals. There are moments we may even fear capsizing. But the "ark" of the church sails onward with every stripe of the human race onboard toward the safe have of eternity (Genesis 9: 8-15, I Peter 3: 18-22).

More often the church is like a pilgrimage navigating the "wilderness" of our world (Mark 1:12-15).

It's a world where we all struggle with the temptations of things that are not good for us. It is a wilderness where, like Jesus, we contend with "wild beasts" of all sorts: hatred, corruption, selfishness. And there's plenty of wild rage and untamed anger around us! Those "beasts" can devour your spirit. When the beasts are "tamed," the world becomes a more humane place.

And like Jesus, along the path, we meet people, often strangers, who mend the patchwork of our hearts with threads of love. They seem "heaven-sent." We often call them "angels,"

Yes, our world is a strange yet amazing wilderness!

This Lent, let's together be an "ark" of prayerful hope and peace as we navigate strange times. Let the words of Christ be our "compass," bestowing wisdom as we travel the terrain of life.

The seeds planted in our hearts on the day of baptism, can bloom in winter and every season.

Our ark, our compass is leading us beyond the horizon to an eternal springtime.

Fr. Steven Labaire