

BAPTIZED BY FIRE
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December 4, 2016
Second Sunday in Advent
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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Isaiah 11:1-10

A branch shall grow out of roots of Jesse. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist. The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.

Matthew 3:1-12

In those dark and fearful days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. I baptize you with water, but one more powerful than I is coming. That One will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

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Paula and I watch most movies at home on a flat screen TV. But now and then we like the big screen experience. So last week we saw Mel Gibson's *Hacksaw Ridge*, a WWII story about a certain Desmond Doss who served as a medic in one of the war's most bloody battles in the Pacific.

I can't recommend the movie since it includes long, gruesome scenes of violence, guts and gore. *Gore-ography*, as someone put it. I can't recommend the movie but I can commend its hero.

As it turns out, *Hacksaw Ridge* is a mirror image of another Mel Gibson film, *The Passion of Christ*. In both stories the hero takes an unpopular path and despite ridicule and persecution refuses to give up, staying true to the way of peace. It's easy to praise the way of peace; not so easy to practice it.

Desmond Doss was born and raised in Lynchburg, VA by a devout Seventh Day Adventist mother and a WWI veteran, a volcanic father prone to alcohol abuse and violence. The father fiercely opposed his two sons desire to join another bloody war of senseless slaughter.

His sons enlisted anyway. It was, they said, the honorable thing to do.

But Desmond had another mission in mind. He would not carry a weapon. He would be a conscientious objector, or as he put it: a conscientious *cooperator*. He would serve as a medic.

Years before, as a young boy, Desmond nearly killed his own brother Harold during one of their frequent fights. He grabbed a brick and viciously struck his brother's head. Desmond jumped back, horrified, shivering and staring at his brother's bloodied head.

What had gotten into him?

Several years later during a domestic spat, Desmond's father aimed a gun at his wife's head. Desmond jumped in between them. On that day Desmond swore he would never hold a gun.

It was a kind of baptism by fire.

It's one thing to be baptized in water; it's something else to be baptized by fire. The Spirit, like fire, transforms from the inside out. You can wash coal in water a thousand times; only fire will convert it.

Following that gun-threatening episode, Desmond and his mother stood together gazing at a large decorated display of the Ten Commandments hanging in their hallway. She pointed to the 6th commandment. *Thou shalt not kill.* Desmond stared at the depiction of Cain killing Abel. With an arm round her son, a strong and determined mother was giving second birth to her son.

Desmond repented of his own violence, made amends, and chose to give his life to the way of peace and healing.

At Fort Jackson, SC, during basic training Desmond announced his intention to not carry a rifle. He would carry a medic's bundle and his Bible but no weapon of any sort. And, by the way, he would do no work on Saturdays, his Sabbath.

The commanding officer along with the entire company turned on Desmond with scorn, taunts and mockery. They called him coward and other names.

The army tried to discharge him as mentally unstable. He was threatened with a court martial. *All I want to do, he said, is serve my country and my company by saving lives, not taking them. My Lord and Savior Jesus commands me to love others, not kill them. Is that so crazy?*

Not willingly or quickly, but eventually the commanding officers relented. So off Desmond went with his company to the Pacific theater.

On top of Hacksaw Ridge, which was reached by scaling a 350-foot cliff, Desmond's battalion was quickly decimated and under heavy enemy fire retreated, scrambling back down the cliff leaving hundreds of dead and wounded men behind.

Desmond stayed on top of the ridge. Throughout the ensuing day and night he dragged one wounded man after another to the edge of the cliff and gently lowered them 350 feet to safety with an improvised rope sling. Each time he uttered a prayer: *Lord, help me save one more*—and then he scrambled back into hell to save one more and one more, 75 in all, including a Japanese soldier.

In a final close encounter with the enemy Desmond absorbed the blast of a grenade to protect his comrades. He survived, but barely. When his torn and bloodied body was lowered off the ridge, his comrades—who once ridiculed him as a coward—embraced him as the bravest of all.

They saw in him something they'd never seen before. It was a kind of baptism by fire. *One day the lion and lamb will lie down together. And a little child shall lead them.*

Desmond Doss became the first conscientious objector to receive the Medal of Honor when President Harry Truman pinned it over his heart on October 12, 1945.

Today is the Second Sunday of Advent.

John the Baptist proclaims a message: Repent, turn around—turn from hate to love, turn from despair to hope, from cynicism to joy, from fear to faith. The kingdom of heaven is at hand, or as we might put it: the universal kinship of God is here. We all belong to one family.

Everyday we face choices—not exactly the ones Desmond faced but they are consequential choices nonetheless.

John the Baptist was beheaded by the Roman Empire. The messenger was killed; but the message still resounds. You can hear it in many voices, including the song of the angels. The invitation to peace and goodwill for all still beckons. The door is open.

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Hymn 123
"It Came Upon the Midnight Clear"