

Eight Weekend After Pentecost (B/RCL): “Rescued by God’s Grace: the Wild Boar Soccer Team and Us”
Ephesians 1:3-14
July 14-15, ‘18
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

The deputy commander of Thailand’s Third Army had this to say about the rescue of 12 young soccer players and the coach of their “Wild Boar” team from the Tham Luang Cave this past week:

The most important piece of the rescue was good luck. So many things could have gone wrong, but somehow we managed to get the boys out.¹

Good luck?? Folks this week have been telling me how frequently and passionately they’d prayed for the survival of the boys and the safety of the rescuers. From our perspective, divine providence, God’s grace, heavenly answer to prayers raised up around the world explain the successful rescue, not generic “good luck”! The prayers ascended from all corners of the globe and were addressed to God in a variety of ways, voiced by the faithful of **all** religions. Whether addressed as God, Jesus, Adonai, Allah, the Great Spirit, Buddha or any other name, the same Divine One hears our cries.

A Thai Navy SEAL, one of the last people out of the cave before it flooded shortly after the last leg of the rescue was complete, wore a Buddha amulet around his neck for the entire mission. He had protected it with waterproof tape. He was in agreement with many other Buddhist divers and local residents, believing that the final flood was divinely held off until the last evacuee had reached safety:

“The cave is sacred,” he said. “It was protected until the very end.”²

What a beautiful chorus of prayers in **many** languages from around the globe our Lord must have heard! How our Lord’s heart must have been warmed by this rare occasion when **all** God’s children of **all** colors, races, nationalities, religions were surely in agreement about one thing! Especially in these days when relationships between countries are so fractured, what a ray of hope that the international community can still work together for good! That’s heartening for all of us.

It was God’s grace, channeled through international cooperation, that saved the 13 members of that Thai soccer team. You’ve probably read or heard some of these statistics:

- 10,000 people contributed to the rescue in 1 way or another,
- including 2,000 soldiers and 200 divers, as well as representatives from 100 government agencies.

We Americans helped with logistics; the British provided some of the most experienced cave divers, along with Australia, China, Finland and the U.S. Over the course of the rescue enough water was pumped out of the cave to fill 400 Olympic swimming pools, so much that neighboring fields were flooded. One woman who'd been preparing to plant her rice crop before her field became inundated refused to apply for government reimbursement of her lost income, saying the government had other important aspects of the rescue to pay for, and the boys' safe return was the only compensation she wished:

“I am more than willing to have my rice fields flooded as long as the children are safe,” she said. “The boys are like my children.”³

There are so many events in the world that make people question God's existence or God's compassion or God's power to save that we **have** to take advantage of this chance to point to God's fingerprints all over this rescue! For instance: the 25 year old coach, Mr. Ekkapol Chantawong, was orphaned as a child; he and his family were part of an ethnic minority and lived in Myanmar. As other destitute orphans frequently do in that corner of the world, he entered a Buddhist monastery in Thailand, where he was a monk for nearly a decade. One of his jobs was taking care of the younger novices, which prepared him well to be mother hen of his little brood marooned a mile underground in the cave. He taught the boys how to meditate as a way to minimize stress, push back their fears and wait patiently for rescue in terrible circumstances. (At one point they had no water left and resorted to licking moisture from the cave walls.) Mr. Ekkapol left the monkhood but still works at the monastery as a custodian. A monk who knows him has said without hesitation that the boys' learning to meditate “helped save their lives.”⁴ (So much for “good luck” getting all the credit!)

Mr. Ekkapol is considered “stateless” – a man without a country. No country claims him because he belongs to an ethnic minority from Myanmar. Another “stateless” person in this incredible story is the 14-year-old who served as interpreter for the British divers who discovered the kids deep inside the cave. Adul Sam-on is part of yet another ethnic minority, a tribe descended from headhunters! He is at the head of his class and speaks 5 languages. When he was 6 years old his illiterate parents smuggled him from Myanmar into Thailand in the hopes he could gain the education that would save him from the

life of poverty they faced and also so he would escape the fate of becoming a child warrior in a guerrilla group. His parents dropped him off at a Baptist church and pled with the pastor for his safekeeping. In the school Adul attends, 20% of the students are citizens of no country, like him, and half the students are kids from ethnic minorities. The principal commented, "Stateless children have a fighting spirit that makes them want to excel... Adul is the best of the best"⁵ – and God put Adul just where he needed to be, to serve as a communication lifeline.

We know that there was 1 life lost during the rescue operation: that of a retired Thai Navy SEAL, Saman Gunan, who had volunteered as a diver and died, either because of lack of oxygen or hypothermia deep in the bowels of the cave. So it wasn't just international cooperation and coordination on high levels that helped to bring about the miracle. It was also the self-sacrifice and incredible bravery of individuals. The rescue had its cost -- especially the life of Saman Gunan.

In this weekend's epistle from the letter to the Ephesians we're reminded that:

In [Jesus Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished upon us. (Ephesians 1:7)

Another translation of that is:

*For it is in him that **we have a deliverance which cost his life**.... (William Barclay)*

The word translated *redemption* or *deliverance* has to do with paying ransom for a captive or POW, buying the freedom of a slave, or arranging for the lifting of a death sentence. When we were powerless to save ourselves, our Lord Jesus paid the price of our sins, erased the death sentence imposed on us because of them, lifted us up out of the grave into a resurrected life. It's in Holy Baptism that we come to share in the blessings that flow from our Lord's suffering and death on Calvary. This weekend Maverick Rhys dies and rises in the waters of Baptism. In today's passage from Ephesians we read:

...you also...were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory. (Ephesians 1:13-14)

The sealing is with fragrant oil in Holy Baptism: the cross traced with chrism on our forehead. In the olden days, when a package was sent it was sealed with wax, stamped with an imprint showing

ownership. Maverick is stamped with Christ's cross, set apart for Christ, marked as Christ's own. Karl Barth wrote that we aren't sealed just for a moment but for a lifetime. The sealing is "a continuous flow of strength from God to man – the perpetual or ever new giving of strength, wisdom, courage, joy, and the right words...It enables the saints to do things they would not do of their own resources..." Maverick, big sister Roan, big brother Ganon, their parents Lindsay & Chris are all sealed with the Holy Spirit, marked with the cross of Christ forever – as **we** are, too. They and we are part of the Body of Christ and the much larger family of the children of God, who petitioned God from all corners of the globe for a baker's dozen of players from the Wild Boar soccer team. Ephesians says that God has a plan, carried out by Christ, *"for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth."* (Eph. 1:10)

The world may seem to be in chaos and current events may seem the opposite of any holy plan. But in faith we **do** believe that this world's past, present and future are intimately linked with the God who has created, redeemed and sanctifies us, who "chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to make us holy and blameless before him in love." (Eph. 1:4) We have had God's blessings lavished upon us, including our redemption from sin **and** all the other spiritual and material blessings we enjoy. Our response to being so loved is to love in turn. St. John tells us that if we say we **love** God but **hate** our neighbor we are liars. We are called to love God above all else and love our neighbors as ourselves. That happened in the cave rescue in Thailand and in hearts that sent up prayers all over the globe. There are many more children at risk of terrible things – trapped perhaps not in caves but in refugee camps, in detention centers, in abusive homes, in poverty-stricken communities devastated by famine, war, disease, drugs. Last week Pastor Joe posted this on the Ministerium Facebook page: "If you care about children so much, donate to Family Promise serving children in town this week!" For Christ to "gather all things" to Himself is for Him to draw all people and all of creation to His heart. Like spokes on a wheel, the closer we draw to Him, the closer we draw to each other. The closer we draw to each other, the closer we draw to Him. A costly cave rescue proved it's possible and true. Nothing to do with luck and everything with God's grace. Amen

¹Hannah Beach, Richard C. Paddock and Muktita Suhartono, "Intricate Rescue: 'I Still Can't Believe It Worked,'" *NY Times* (July 13, 2018, pp. A1 & A10), A10.

²*Ibid.*

³Muktita Suhartono and Richard C. Paddock, "Thais Debate Trying Rescue Soon or in 4 Months," *NY Times* (July 6, 2018), A4.

⁴Hannah Beech, "Poor, Stateless and Used to Beating Long Odds," *NY Times* (July 11, 2018, A1 & A8), A8.

⁵*Ibid.*

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