

## EPIPHANY VI

*I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving your God, obeying God, and holding fast to God; for that means life to you and length of days.* Deuteronomy 30:19

The first Sunday I was back here at St. John's after being in rehab for alcohol addiction, this lesson from Deuteronomy was the proper for the day. Sometimes, as then, the readings for a Sunday seem a work of the Holy Spirit, rather than of the Standing Liturgical Commission or whoever creates our lectionary.

Of course the intervention that had sent me to Hazelden Treatment Center had offered me, or forced me, the opportunity to choose life, and I had, and have. That is, a life free of dependence on alcohol, a life free of that particular shackle and shame.

For a convergence of reasons, I've been thinking and talking and reading a good deal about addiction lately. Last week I preached about my friend's son Seth and his heroin addiction, and this week I want to talk about a memoir I've just finished, **Lit**, by the poet and memoirist Mary Karr.

As a writer, I think about titles, and **Lit** is a great one. Mary Karr is a literary person, she writes **literature**. One of the innumerable euphemisms for drunkenness is being **lit**. So there's a double entre, and as I discovered toward the end of the book and will reveal, there's even a third association.

I had read some of Mary's other work, including her first run-away best selling memoir **The Liar's Club**, which I didn't love, and a book of poems, which I don't remember. She has a lot of attitude, and while she tells plenty of colorful and crazy stories, I didn't get a lot in the way of reflection or wisdom from her other work. But several people whose opinions I respect recommended **Lit**, so I gave it a shot.

The first third of the book was as I remembered **The Liar's Club**, a lot of attitude and self-conscious antics, a lot of coarse language – and it has to be a *lot*, to bother me. But when Karr begins to write about her addiction, and particularly about her journey toward sobriety, the book becomes compelling.

And she has some great AA stories. Here's one

The guy at the front calls on a lady in a boucle Chanel suit, complete with gold buttons and long chains hanging down. She might've stepped from the pages of *Town Country* magazine. She relates how she used to tuck her vodka bottle inside a turkey

carcass stashed in a basement freezer. While cooking dinner, she'd run down and yank it out and guzzle a bit. And her family, who'd done two interventions, kept rifling laundry hampers and closets, looking to no avail for her stash. The one night, she tells us in a demure voice, the frost had built up so deep she couldn't midwife the bottle out, so she just upended the whole bird, guzzling out of it.

And the guy who

...talks about burying bottles all over his mother's yard before being dragged into rehab. Fresh out, he needed only to secret inside his Speedo bathing suit a plastic straw. Then he'd grab a towel and some tanning lotion and step outside, saying he wanted to catch some rays. His mother would study him all day through the sliding door, totally flummoxed when he came crab-walking in—drunk and beet-red—at sundown.

And the guy who argues

It's a logical fallacy that they're telling me I have a disease whose defining symptom is believing you don't have a disease.

And ain't it all the truth?! I heard stories almost this crazy when I was at Hazelden: the guy who crazy-glued his eyes shut. Why was that? The woman who packed, drunk to come to treatment, and put 27 pairs of shoes in her suitcase, one for each day. "Are you going to take any clothes?" her daughter asked.

And of course all of us with the disease of addiction believe we don't have a disease. We all believe we are choosing to drink or drug, and that we could choose to stop. Except we can't.

And the paradoxical thing about the disease of addiction is that of course there is choice involved, just not the choice we think when we are using. Addiction is a disease we can choose to abstain from. And ultimately, if we are to choose life—full life, productive life, the abundant life Jesus promises—that's the choice we must and do make.

In that, we are blessed. You can't *choose* to abstain from cancer, or heart disease, or diabetes. You can make choices that minimize the hazards of your illness – maybe—but you can't eliminate their impact on your life. With addiction, it's possible to choose freedom.

Mary Karr not only gets sober, but she gets religion, she gets Christianity, in fact, she gets Roman Catholicism. And I want to quote her at some length on this, because her experience mirrors what I hear from so many of you, not in relation to addiction, but about the hazards of approaching Christianity.

Here's a conversation with her AA sponsor.

Faith is not a feeling, she says. It's a set of actions. By taking the actions, you demonstrate more faith than someone who actually has experienced the rewards of prayer and so feels hope. Fake it till you make it. ...

Wouldn't any god be pissed, (Mary asks) that I only show up now, (under) machine gun fire.

First off--can't you see this?--you have a concept of God already. It's one who's pissed at you.

Which is oddly true, given my godless upbringing. Where had that come from?

And later on she writes, about the run-up to her baptism

The magic stuff is what turns me off... Sometimes I think of Jesus as some carnival trickster. Maybe the whole Resurrection was a scam...

(But) however much I balk at Christian miracles, I think friends manufacturing secular miracles--me included sometimes--is loonier. Like Deb thinks her wind chimes tinkling are messages from her dead ex-husband. You mean to tell me, I say to her on the phone, you don't believe in the Resurrection but you think Richard controls the wind?

If Jesus isn't (a) crazy, (b) a false prophet or con man or (c) his disciples weren't, I have to at least consider the fourth possibility: that (d) some of those miracles had some foundation in fact. Somebody saw something remarkable.

Once you allow even that sliver of possibility, that crack of light, it's not long before the stone rolls away from the tomb...

In the end, no white light shines out from the wounds of Christ to bathe me in His glory. Faith is a choice like any other. If you're picking a career or a husband--or deciding whether to have a baby-- there are feelings pro and con out the wazoo. But thinking it through is--at the final hour--horse dookey. You can only try it out.

In her final paragraph Mary Karr writes-- and here's where the third nuance of the title, of **Lit**, comes fully forth-- she writes about being lit with the light of God.

Every now and then we enter the presence of the numinous and deduce for an instant how we're formed, in what detail the force that infuses every petal might specifically run through us, wishing only to lure us into our full potential.

*Wishing only to lure us into our full potential.*

*I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live...*

**Alleluia! Amen**