

Out of the Water

Genesis 9:8-17; Mark 1:9:15

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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We have arrived at the First Sunday of Lent.

The theme of the worship resources we are drawing from this Lenten season is “Deep calls to Deep.”

I want to read a portion of the introduction to the theme that was put together by a team from Mennonite Church Eastern Canada. They began writing the resources around a year ago, when the pandemic was just beginning to creep up on us:

Suddenly the wilderness of Lent was all too real, as we were stripped of our usual resources, surroundings, activities, and circles of relationship. As our world changed from week to week and even day to day, we didn’t know what kind of reality we would be planning worship for in one year’s time...

Our team dove into the Scriptures for this season and found within them stories, songs, and promises that called us to identify what is essential, what really matters, who we are at our core, and what God asks (and doesn’t ask) of us. In the Scriptures and the traditions of Lent, we saw a scrubbing away of the excess to get to the core of our Christian journeys and of ourselves. We knew that Lent 2021 could be a time of reopened grief but also a season for renewed questioning of what we have discovered to be the deepest and truest parts of our lives and our journeys with God.

These words resonated with me when I first read them.

It has been a year unlike any other. We’re running out of ways to say this by now, aren’t we?

But I, too, hope that this Lenten season can be one where given all that has been stripped away over the last year, we can each be called back to the deepest and truest parts of our lives and our journeys with God.

The expression “Deep calls to deep” comes from Psalm 42:7. This is the psalm that begins “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O my God.”

The psalmist is in despair, his soul is downcast, he feels forgotten by God. He knows that his need is greater than anything he could meet. He needs God.

“Deep calls to deep” is an expression of profound longing for God’s presence, assurance, and deliverance in the context of suffering and lack, in a dry and thirsty land.

What better posture in which to approach the cross of Christ and the Easter season, particularly during these uncertain times?

We have two texts where water features prominently.

In our OT text from Genesis, we have deliverance *from* water. Noah’s family and the remnants of animal life with them stand on the edge of a receding sea that had swallowed up the world.

I think we often have these idyllic scenes of the flood in our minds full of animals and greenery and the dove with the leaf in its mouth. Our own church nursery has a lovely mural of the animals created by, I learned this morning, by Maxine Willms.

We forget that the story of the flood is a pretty grim one! God was grieved at the wickedness and violence that had become rampant on earth and unleashed a flood in an attempt at one massive reset. Noah, his family, and the floating zoo were all that were preserved.

In our gospel text, we have deliverance *through* water. In the story of Jesus’ baptism, we hear the same powerful affirmation of Jesus’ identity and mission that we heard on Transfiguration Sunday last week, only in more personal language: not “this is my son” but “*You* are my son whom I love; with you I am well pleased.

In the first text, water represents threat, chaos, destruction. The threat of “uncreation,” an undoing of the world that God had called “good.”

In the second, water is a means through which Jesus identifies with sinful humanity.

Jesus did not need to get baptized. He had no sins to confess unlike everyone else coming to the Jordan to be baptized with John. This baptism scene is for our sake, not Jesus’.

So, we have these two scenes.

We have Noah's family having emerged from the flood hearing the promise of God to never again visit such catastrophe on creation.

We have Jesus emerging from the waters of the Jordan as God's instrument of salvation.

What comes next?

I have this weird fascination with looking at the verses around the readings that are selected each week, whether by the lectionary or my own choosing.

We have become conditioned to digest the bible in little bite-sized chunks, often the parts that are deemed most inspirational or worthy of public consumption.

But what's going on before our various readings? Or after? Or around?

What comes next?

You would think that in both cases, the next chapter in the story would be one of hope and peace and goodness and fresh optimism. You would, alas, think wrong.

In the verses immediately after our reading from Genesis, Noah responds to his freedom and to God's promise by getting spectacularly drunk and passing out naked in his tent.

(A bit of time had obviously elapsed as Noah had to plant a vineyard, but in the text only three verses elapse between God's promise and Noah staggering into his tent.)

This is followed by a bizarre scene where one of his sons, Ham, backs up into the tent to try to cover him up while avoiding looking at him, and for his efforts, Noah curses Ham's descendants, the Canaanites, and almost spitefully blesses Ham's brothers Shem and Japheth.

Noah has barely stepped off the ark of deliverance and he is embarrassing himself and stoking conflict between his sons.

From there, the story would proceed to a dispersal of the nations and, eventually, the scene at the Tower of Babel where God confuses the people's language because they wanted to make a name for themselves apart from God.

And, as we know, the rest of the Old Testament is not exactly exhibit A in sinlessness and faithful adherence to God.

If God's plan in the flood was to get rid of wickedness and violence, it doesn't seem to have worked. Sin persists. Creation 2.0 would, alas, not be so different from the world that emerged out of the fall in Genesis 3.

In the verses immediately following Jesus' baptism, Jesus is thrust out into the wilderness. No sooner has the voice from heaven finished saying, "With you I am well pleased" than we read these words:

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him (Mark 1:12-13).

Divine favour evidently does not mean the absence of struggle, even suffering.

Yes, there is a symbolic aspect to Jesus' sojourn in the desert. His forty days in the wilderness is a re-enactment of Israel's forty years between the exodus from Egypt and their entrance into the land of promise. Jesus is faithful where Israel was not. This is part of the point of this passage.

But it's not just about symbolism. It also reveals an important truth about the spiritual life more generally. It does not come without hardship.

Indeed, sometimes being faithful to God's call in our lives takes us straight into suffering. This is how God grows our faith.

It is the wilderness places where we come to the end of ourselves, where we realize that our resources are insufficient for the task of becoming all we were created to be, where we sometimes even feel abandoned and alone and our souls pant for the living water of God.

These are the places where God is at work, refining us, restoring us, repurposing us, ministering to us, and delivering us.

And so, on this first Sunday of Lent, we are reminded of a basic and crucial truth about God and about the life of faith.

The purposes of God are not thwarted by the sin and suffering that are part of life.

God does not abandon Noah and his offspring to their sin. God is true to his covenant to never again wipe it all out and start again.

From this point on in the story, God works alongside human frailty and stubbornness, always calling them back, always offering a better way forward.

There are hard chapters in the story, but despite his people's sin, God's love and faithfulness do not change. God is faithful where we are not.

And similarly, suffering does not signify God's absence.

It can drive us deeper toward the heart of God. Like Jesus in the wilderness, the barren places can be places where the deepest parts of who we are cry out to God knowing that God alone can deliver.

I earlier looked at what comes next in the story after both of our texts this morning.

What comes next for you? For me?

We don't know, obviously. If there's one thing this last year has taught us it is that there is much that we do not know and cannot predict.

We don't know what looms on our horizons.

What I am confident of is that while there is goodness and joy and hope ahead, there will also be both sin and suffering in your future and mine.

Even as we seek to draw nearer to God this Lenten season, and even as we might look forward to Easter more eagerly than in years past, we will not magically cease to be sinners over the course of the next forty days or so.

We will still continue to miss the mark. We will still do what we ought not to do, still leave undone that which ought to be done. We will still choose self over God and neighbour, despite our best intentions and deepest desires.

And of course, suffering is part of the landscape this side of eternity. We know this.

There will be unwelcome diagnoses. There will be relational struggles and vocational anxieties. There will be agonies over kids who choose paths we would never want for them.

There will be seasons of doubt and frustration and confusion. There will be times where we wonder where God is.

There will be death. For eventually death comes for us all and for those we love.

Sin and suffering are indeed ever-present parts of our world and our experience.

The good news on this First Sunday of Lent is that the purposes of God are not thwarted by these things.

God keeps his promises even when we are faithless. The story of Noah and the long winding road that proceeded from the flood reminds us of this.

God never abandons us and strengthens us for the journey, even when we are pushed out into the wilderness. The story of Jesus' road after his baptism reminds us of this.

We cannot go where God is not.

Thanks be to God for this deepest of truths.

Amen.

