

SLD04.18.10 3rd Easter Ocean Sunday
Emory Presbyterian Church
Job

An Overall Spiritually Moisturizing Day

Last week when Deedra focused on the blessings of the Sky, she opened a new sermon series she and I are sharing – a season of celebrating creation. We planned this season of creation celebration for several reasons. For one thing, after our fall sermon series addressing tough questions of faith and our Lenten series addressing some of the life-draining emotions in which we often get stuck, I, for one, was ready to lighten up. So although each service includes a somber element of confession, our primary aim is to focus these four Sundays on praise and celebration of God's creation.

As founding members of Presbytery's Earth Covenant Ministry, we also wanted effectively to respond to their urging to broaden our awareness of our environment *during worship* beyond just Earth Day.

Focusing on God's creation during worship is also a criteria of a matching grant we'll be applying for soon from Georgia Interfaith Power and Light to help us upgrade our heating and air conditioning systems in this sanctuary and make them more efficient and effective. So for four Sundays we're highlighting a different aspect of creation: sky, ocean, which is today, planet earth next week on Earth Day Sunday, and mountains, the Sunday after that.

And I'll tell you, it's a different thing to build a sermon and worship service on a manifest expression of creation instead of a particular text of scripture. Not that the two are unrelated. Creation is observed, rued, celebrated, and feared all through scripture. And for many, the beauty and complexity of nature offers the most clearly understood

scripture there is. It's just that I'm used to starting with the written word of God and seeing what emerges from it, rather than starting with – in this case, the ocean – and hearing what lessons and words it has to offer.

Still, reading creation as an expression of God's word is what environmentalists of faith keep urging us communities of faith to do, placing our awe and appreciation in the lap of our creating, redeeming God. Regarding not just us humans but *all* of creation as created in God's image opens us to a renewed respect for the joy and diversity of the divine imagination. Deepening consideration of our kinship with the plants and animals and elements that surround and sustain us amplifies our sense of responsibility and mutual dependency. And regarding the care of creation through the lens of discipleship calls us to partner with God in the redemption of creation.

Just as God gathered up the broken Jesus and transformed him into the risen Christ, so God's plan for the fullness of time, as David just read from Ephesians, is to gather up *all* things in heaven and on earth for the purpose of healing and transforming them. *Our* job as the mentally endowed, oppositionally-thumbed, imaginative bipeds of the order is to initiate, participate, and lead cooperative actions aligned with God's intentions.

When we do claim that call, or when it claims us, we find ourselves beginning to pay attention when we hear, for example, that our "addiction to single-use plastic packaging has created a global marine-debris crisis, that massive pollution is killing our coral reefs, that bottom-trawling gears are wiping out habitat and fish nurseries, that over-fishing with nets is profoundly depleting whole species of marine life." Or feeling personal concern when someone like oceanographer Sylvia Earle, otherwise known as

“Her Deepness,” announces that “we’ve lost or consumed on the order of 90% of... tunas, swordfish, marlin, sharks...due to the ...luxury market for things such as shark fin soup, and sushi, and even tuna fish sandwiches.”¹

Did you know, for example, that “the tuna in your sandwich is likely to be ten years old, that it takes about six years for them to mature, and left alone, they live to be thirty or more years old? Or that the orange roughy that sells in the store for around \$8.00 a pound can be 200 years old!? Or that a study by the Bush administration reported that one out of six women in this country has too much mercury in her system safely to give birth to a child without the possibility of neurological damage?” “Don’t eat swordfish, period,” advises ocean advocate, Ted Danson. “There too much mercury in it.”

Scary stats like these can seem bigger and meaner and more overwhelming than you and I can do anything about. But as people of faith, we’re used to tackling the impossible, aren’t we? By taking little mini steps – or more like, two steps forward, one step back – toward God’s intention for the beloved community?.

Which is why I got my sister, Susan, who works at the Georgia Aquarium, to get us these pamphlets about which fish to eat and which to avoid. It folds up into a little wallet insert.

But enough of dour and dire environmental news – we’ve heard much of that before, have we not? And already we’ve spoken our confession, sought forgiveness and received a word of pardon. Already many of us live our lives responsibly and redemptively, even as we seek to learn more. So today let’s just relax a minute into the ocean’s embrace and delight in her welcome; float a while on her wisdom and allow her

¹ www.deltaskymag.com April 2010, p. 65.

waves to wash our worry away. Just for a bit, let's let the water from which we all emerged hold us, support us, gently buoy and sustain us.

Back when I used to do children's sermons (don't like 'em, don't ask me to do 'em, always seem more for the benefit of adults than the children) one of my favorites was about how God is like the ocean, and you and I, like the fish in the ocean. For it's in the ocean that fish live and move and have their being, isn't it. Water up, water down, water all around, yet what fish are remotely aware of it, remotely conscious of the ocean's importance to it: how the ocean holds it, nourishes it, protects it, moves it along; gives it its being and takes it away again...all outside the fish's awareness or understanding or even conscious participation. How like a fish in the ocean do we live and move and have our being in God, though we seek to be conscious of it.

For "when you cannot sense this being held," say Bahauddin (that's Rumi's dad), "nothing interests, nothing delights or makes you wonder. Human aliveness fades as vision fails to see the source that makes and moves through form, shaping events."²

But who of us doesn't enjoy being ocean-rocked for a day, a week, a season, at the beach? Who of us *doesn't* feel soothed and rested by the steady rhythm of crashing waves, a salty breeze, the spacious sense of water as far as the eye can see, as far as the mind can dream. The oceans that cover two thirds of the Earth's surface are for all of us a vast domain of mystery and beauty. And comfort.

I love the ocean. For me, something happens in its presence: a gentling, a loosening, a resting. Last summer when I was traveling through Israel, my Macedonia ministers and I so on task with touring, learning, reflecting, worshipping....

² The Drowned Book, Ecstatic and Earthy Reflections of Bahauddin, the father of Rumi, Coleman Barks, HarperCollins, 2004, p. 108.

And then one day on the way from the Galilee, which nobody wanted to leave, to Jerusalem, where nobody wanted to go, we passed through the ancient seaport of Caesarea Maritime and were given the grace to walk a moment along its shores. And before the crystalline and crashing waves of that mighty ancient harbor, all talk ceased – all teaching and learning, all questioning and wondering – and we seekers of God began slowly to separate one from another and wander – some into the waves, others toward the rocks, two or three pausing to squish their sweaty feet in the hot sand.

A grandeur took over, some sort of bigness and denseness and moistness before which we each of us were silent but attentive, alert, gulping the majestic beauty of the place, and of the moment, to slake the thirst of our souls. In a land where the presence or absence of water determines politics, cultures, the fate of whole peoples, we were suddenly awash with its abundance, inside and out. So transfixed, so held, so rocked and soothed and refreshed were we by the immensity of the ocean that afternoon that it became, as one card sent to me described it, “overall spiritually moisturizing day.”

My mother loved the ocean. But because of the physical instability of her later years, she had been barred from the beach for well over a decade. Until we discovered at a beach house lent to us by former parishioners, *rentable beach wheelchairs!* FREE rentable beach wheelchairs! (You just had to leave your driver’s license.) Whoever had heard of such a thing? But there they were – huge, comfortable wheelchairs with adjustable foot rests and tires like dune buggies’ that could pass easily over the sand and even into the water!

And suddenly she who had always loved and swum in and sailed over the seas, who had collected sea shells and beach glass to make lamp bases and Christmas ornaments, who, despite her fair skin, would slather on sun screen and sit under a beach umbrella and read or just stare for hours and hours and hours at a time, could sail over the sands and into the beiramar, and roll for hours alongside her grandchildren who skittered back and forth between the waves to show her their treasures from the sea.

Not so my father, however. My father would never go into the sea. Not since my brother drowned in a kayaking accident in 1957. Never forgiving the water for taking his boy, my father refused ever to frolic in its waves again.

And, really, for all its beauty and magnetism, who of us is not aware of the impersonal power of the ocean, its mighty force, its deadly strength? I recall in my younger years readying myself to plunge into the waves of the north shore of the island of Oahu. "Be careful of your timing," shouted my wiser friend. Ignoring her, I charged into the froth only to find myself moments later sprawling on the beach with skinned knees and elbows, sand up my nose, , and no bathing suit whatsoever. As Anne Morrow Lindbergh remarks, The sea does not reward those who are too anxious, too greedy, or too impatient."³ Ask anyone in Sumatra, Chile, Haiti, New Orleans, or any other coastal town or island nation that functions at the mercy of the ocean's whim; the ocean is a force to be reckoned with.

And yet, for all unmanageable power, the ocean remains a world not only of mystery and beauty but of fascinating depths and spectacular life forms.

³ <http://blog.gaiam.com/quotes/authors/anne-morrow-lindbergh>

In today's Lukan text, Jesus tells the first disciples to "put out into the depths of that deep and mysterious water." Now he's talking to fishermen. Experienced, weary fishermen who, after working all night, are now washing their nets by day to put them away. Nets are time-consuming to make; you don't let them sit around all day covered in brine and fish parts to deteriorate in the hot sun. Tired and cranky, ready for bed, Peter resists Jesus' command – "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing.

Jesus just looks at him.

"Ookay. If you say so."

Wearily, reluctantly, Simon Peter and the others put out and let down their nets once more. And what do you know but that the disciples catch so *many* fish their nets begin to break! So many fish that they had to call for help, to fill yet another boat to the sinking point.

What's different this time? What's so special about this particular deep into which the disciples are to cast? Just how deep *is* deep, anyway?

The deep is the realm of mystery and wonder.

The deep is the unknown.

The deep is what, despite his miseries, Job is challenged to explore.

The deep is what, despite their weariness, the disciples are commanded to fish.

Outside their understanding, beyond their comfort zones, the deep is where Jesus points the disciples to find the most abundant catch.

But just what is that deep that Jesus points each of us to explore? What might we find if we explored it?

Because of its majesty, because of its mystery, perhaps we cannot know until we put out into the deep and drop our nets in faith. “To receive a gift from the sea,” Linbergh writes “one should lie empty, open, choiceless as a beach.”

And what is the gift for which we wait? See if you hear a hint in from poet Mary Oliver, who says,

I go down to the edge of the sea
How everything shines in the morning light!
The cusp of the whelk,
the broken cupboard of the clam,
the opened, blue mussels,
moon snails, pale pink and barnacle scarred—
and nothing at all whole or shut, but tattered, split,
dropped by the gulls onto the gray rocks and all the moisture gone.
It's like a schoolhouse
of little words,
thousands of words.
First you figure out what each one means by itself,
the jingle, the periwinkle, the scallop
full of moonlight.

Then you begin, slowly, to read the whole story.⁴

The story, I would suggest, of how you and I and all creation live and move and have our being in the mystery and the majesty of our loving God.

To the glory of God. Amen.

⁴ <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=31131>, “Breakage.”