



Sermons from Northwood United Church

“Living Water: More than a metaphor”

Exodus 17:1-7, Mark 1:9-11

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May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

Did it rain yesterday? Even a little bit? I wondered yesterday morning when I got up, whether I really saw raindrop marks on the back deck. If it did it wasn't much- barely enough to even change the colour, much less give the maple tree and the rhododendrons a new lease on life. It is dry out there, and January seems like a distant memory. You remember January, when we all thought summer would never come, more water than anybody wanted, flooding in the interior, bridges washing out, slides knocking down houses. Water water everywhere.

You know bread is a central biblical symbol of our faith, the body of Christ, the bread of life, and wine, well, wine means life and celebration- the cup of blessing. But friends, water- I dare say there is no more central symbol of our faith than water. How are we to choose what to read from the bible when in this season of creation we come to the element of water. The Spirit of God blows over the waters of creation, and brings forth life. The creation is closed and re-opened in the story of Noah and the flood. Moses is tossed into the Nile River in a basket and is drawn out of the water, life saved, hope restored. The waters of the Red sea are held back while the people walk through, and then again, the Jordan as they walk on dry ground into the promised land, water to quench the desperate thirst of the people, gushing from a rock. And that says nothing of the waters of baptism, Jesus' and ours, the healing waters from the pool at Siloam, the woman at the well given living water by Jesus... I could go on and on about the spiritual significance of water in the bible. Water means creation and life, it means blessing. It means that the future is possible, and open.

But in this season of creation in which we celebrate the creative hand of God at work through creation in our life and the life of the planet, we celebrate and focus on more than the spiritual significance of things. We have talked about the earth, the soil the land and our earthiness as a human species. We are not just earthy spiritually, we return to the earth upon which our life depends. And we have celebrated the air, the breath, the wind- and it is spirit, but it is also life for us, literally the breath of life. And today, the water, the living water, richly symbolic in our faith, but once again, it is far more than a metaphor. On this planet, it is life itself. It is the critical difference between life on earth and life on Mars. Of all things we ought to pay attention to in the celebration of God's creative handiwork, water is the thing.

Allana Mitchell, environmental reporter, author of the book “Seasick: the global ocean in crisis” spoke to BC Conference of the United Church in June at our annual meeting and she reminds us that although the state of the air in this planet matters a great deal to our survival, and we live on the land so that affects us most directly, the oceans cover over 70% of the earth's surface, and when you think about living space, space on the earth that can sustain life, the ocean is the most living part of this earth. When you account for its depth, it offers 99% of the living space on earth. Oh we have a hard time living there but that's just us land lubbers. Our life depends on the health of the ocean. Most of our oxygen is created there. And when you look at how humans are changing the composition of the ocean, you get alarmed. We have raised the temperature, changed the level of salt in the water, altered the pH balance- the acidity of the water. All of this can be traced back to human activity. There have emerged what she calls “dead

zones,” huge places in the water where literally nothing is living anymore, where there is no oxygen in the water. Its creepy. It’s like the watery equivalent of a moonscape, in the ocean. She has documented all this and more while at the same time documenting the marvel of the life sustaining miracle of the ocean- how if you go down there, you see life, amazing and beautiful all around you. Ultimately she claims, and backs it up with good science, that the ocean contains the “switch of life,” and that switch can be turned off, and will be turned off if we are not careful.

Now I am not a scientist, I am a pastor, and a theologian. I deal in love and hope, not in carbon and plankton. However, love and hope requires me to get a handle on carbon and plankton. Because frankly, if we don’t re-adjust our habit of taking ancient fossil fuels and burning them pumping carbon into the atmosphere, we will destroy the oceans which oxygenate the air we breathe. And if you love things that breathe, and if you want to have hope for your children and grandchildren, then we people of faith, people of love and hope need to get a handle on what is happening to the ocean. The living water of our faith is connected to the living water in the ocean.

Alanna Mitchell’s message is sobering, because she lays out for us, with good science to back it up, a broken relationship with the oceans. And it feels big- really big. It feels like a turning point in God’s great creative project on earth. And we humans seem to hold the keys to a lot of it. And that is where our faith, our love and our hope comes in. If we believe that by our own ingenuity, by our own cleverness, we can crack this problem, we are in deep trouble. It was our own ingenuity and cleverness that got us into this desert place and we need someone to come along and crack open the waters of hope for us.

Today, in this day and age in the creation, we who care deeply for God’s project on this earth are thirsty for hope- hope that we have not completely blown it, hope for life for our children and grandchildren on this planet. For people of faith in this day and age, naivety is not an option, but neither is despair. Hope is the key. Hope will keep us moving and open.

Alanna Mitchell found hope, but she had to go really deep to find it, and that is not simply metaphorical either. Literally, she needed to go 3000 feet below sea level- yes, 3000 feet. She is one of a very few people who have travelled in a submersible to that depth, almost but not completely beyond the reach of human activity. And here, with only a human constructed shell between her and tons of crushing water, the stone broke open and hope came pouring into her.

“I am flooded with hope,” she writes. “With a sweet consciousness of the rich march of time, stretching from deep past to the remote future, each moment containing all others. It is impossible to think only in the self-indulgent despairing, fearful present when surrounded by life (across these four dimensions). All this time... I have been trying to reason my way to hope, convince myself that hope is justified, to build a case. It’s been a question I have asked every scientist I have met.

In fact, hope just is. You can’t run through a checklist to get to is. Yes, it is absurd and irrational. But like love, it is human. Like laughter, hope catches and spreads. It works logarithmically, like the changes now under way on our planet, like our growing understanding of them, and like our powerful collective human ability to start coping with them...

...We could, if enough of us wanted to, form a new relationship with our planet. We could become the gentle symbionts (living in gentle symbiosis- interdependence) we were meant to be instead of the planetary parasites that we have unwittingly become. Perhaps this is the system switch that will be in the offing. Instead of the ocean lurching further into an irrevocably altered state, maybe humans will irrevocably alter our relationship with it and understand we must keep it healthy if we are to save ourselves.”

At 3000 feet below the surface of the ocean, Alanna Mitchell pulled a Moses. She struck ground and the spiritual waters of hope poured in- hope born of the possibility of change in the

human- planet relationship. Hope born of the possibility of a conversion- a turnaround- a change of heart and mind in relation to the creation.

Friends, that is our territory. That is our business. Every generation of the faithful have been thirsty for hope. Every generation deals with a different set of challenges. Ours happen to be huge and rooted in our relationship with the creation. But to every generation is given the waters of hope, the opportunity of conversion, the possibility of new life. Our call is to take to heart the state of the waters of life, literally, in the oceans, and sink deep into the blessed waters of our baptism, drink deep of the thirst quenching waters of our faith, and live in the hope they bring. Amen.