

## ***For the Joy Set Before Us: A Sermon for the First Sunday of Lent***

Texts: Hebrews 12:1-3, 12-13, Margaret Avison's *The Swimmer's Moment*

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I would like to read a poem by Margaret Avison. If you are of a certain age, you studied it in a Can Lit class. Listen. You can follow along via the insert in your bulletin.

*For everyone*

*The swimmer's moment at the whirlpool comes,  
But many at that moment will not say  
"This is the whirlpool, then."*

*By their refusal they are saved  
From the black pit, and also from contesting  
The deadly rapids, and emerging in  
The mysterious, and more ample, further waters.*

*And so their bland-blank faces turn and turn  
Pale and forever on the rim of suction  
They will not recognize.*

*Of those who dare the knowledge  
Many are whirled into the ominous centre  
That, gaping vertical, seals up  
For them an eternal boon of privacy,  
So that we turn away from their defeat  
With a despair, not for their deaths, but for  
Ourselves, who cannot penetrate their secret  
Nor even guess at the anonymous breadth  
Where one or two have won:  
(The silver reaches of the estuary).*

*From: Winter Sun. Toronto: UofT Press. 1962*

The "swimmer's moment," is a decision point. Such moments might find you on a cliff in Killbear Provincial Park, thirty feet above the water, where you decide, "No, I'm not going to jump after all." Or, perhaps, more seriously for example, our swimmer's moment might come to us that day we must decide to either confront an elderly parent about her need to give up her driver's license, or not.

And naturally, we are anxious about such decision points. We might belly flop. Mom might be very angry and write us out of the will. Fearing trouble, we might choose not to

choose, turn our bland-blank faces away from the whirlpool and live forever on the rim of suction, never daring. A grey life.

Avison says, however, that some people do dare, and so win, “The silver reaches of the estuary.”

An estuary is where the river’s fresh water meets the sea. Estuaries, like Chesapeake Bay or the Amazon Delta, are incredibly rich areas of biodiversity. Estuaries are life. The “silver reaches of the estuary” conjures up images of cottages, crabbing, and late evening bonfires on shore. A good, joyous life.

In our text from Hebrews, you could think of Jesus’ decision to set his face for Jerusalem as his swimmer’s moment.

Jesus could have chosen otherwise. He could have turned around and walked with bland-blank face back to Galilee. He might have chosen to take up carpentry, again. But for the joy set before him, for the sake of the silver reaches of his estuary, he dived in and saw his Lenten journey to its end on a cross.

It is hard to know, two thousand years later, what exact joy Jesus aimed for. He spoke of rising from the dead. He almost certainly wanted to demonstrate the power of turning the other cheek, of changing the world through passive resistance.

But whatever exactly would give Jesus the greatest joy, he would achieve incredible things for humanity only *at great cost to himself*. He was abandoned, whipped, and crucified—because he decided.

In our text Jesus’ story is told so that we will do likewise. The author writes, “let us also lay aside every weight and . . . run with perseverance the race that is set before us,” and then in verse 12, he concludes by saying: Therefore for the joy also set before you, “lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet . . .” Just do it.

And we must, for we live in dangerous times.

I’ve just read Thomas Friedman’s new book, *Thank You for Being Late*. In it, the New York Times columnist describes about 101 crises facing the human race. Economic dislocation. Climate change. Failed states. Desertification. Refugees. Terrorism. Overpopulation. Racism. Ineffective schools. Friedman paints a bleak picture of the world facing its cosmic swimmer’s moment, a world he believes our children and grandchildren will suffer in, unless we act, now.

Perhaps, at this point in the sermon, I should describe some of these crises at greater length. They are, after all, living as we do in our Western bubble of ease, hard for us to see. But I won’t, for now. After all, I know you feel the unease and uncertainty that runs without ceasing, like a long-distance marathoner, under the skin of our culture. This very real unease is

partly, at least, what is fueling the Trump and alt-right phenomena of our era, the siege mentality that is so much a part of life today. The crises of our day loom over us like Mount Vesuvius over ancient Pompey. Now is our swimmer's moment.

Will we act? Or will we live in denial, turning away from the whirlpool? And just what is the joy set before us? A safe, just, meaningful future for our children and grandchildren?

If we do act, there are no guarantees. The deadly rapids are a black pit, says Avison. There is no emergency "stop" button for saving the world from impending tragedy. I suppose acting starts with helping force national spending priorities to avert or mitigate the effects of climate change and habitat destruction and failed states; it continues with our choices at work—what we invest in, who we hire, what strategic goals we choose for our companies. Acting now involves what we buy, how we eat, our politics and our conversation at parties and our willingness to generously support organizations tackling some of our society's deepest fears.

It's like Jesus heading for Jerusalem, that final time. We must dive in to achieve the silver reaches of the estuary. It takes courage and faith in order to achieve the joy set before us. But turning away is so tempting.

It's like this. At the turn of the last century, Blondin was a great French tightrope walker. Once, before ten thousand screaming fans, Blondin inched his way from the Canadian side to the American side of the Falls, above the roaring whirlpool in the Niagara River. As he stepped off his tightrope, his fans chanted his name, "Blondin, Blondin, Blondin."

So Blondin raised his hand. He said, "I am going back across the Falls on my tightrope, but this time I will carry someone on my shoulders. Do you believe me?"

The crowd called back, "We believe! We believe!"

Blondin silenced them again and asked, "Who will be that person?"

And now the crowd was silent. You see, this was their swimmer's moment at the whirlpool below. At last, one man climbed onto Blondin's shoulders and was carried back across the rope to the other side of the whirlpool, winning the silver reaches of the Canadian side. One man faced his swimmer's moment and succeeded—but now the crowd really believed and many clamored for their chance to cross.

My dream, for everyone here, for my grandchildren, is that for the sake of the joy set before us, we will, at our society's swimmer's moment, choose as Jesus chose.

Jesus—God with us, in a lovely, mysterious way—joined us in life's struggle to demonstrate to us that we can satisfy our deepest longings and the world's greatest needs in spite of great risks and dangers. We can act now to emerge in those mysterious and more

ample, further waters. We can climb on each other's shoulders and, step by step, reach the silver reaches of the estuary, the joy set before us.