

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time
Palisades Presbyterian Church
January 22, 2006

Readings: Jonah 3: 1-5, 10
 Mark 1: 14-20

Hymns: 489 Open Now Thy Gates of beauty
 494 Out of Deep, Unordered Waters
 554 Let All Things Now Living

Desert Waters
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Cass Elliot, performer, known best by some as a member of the Momma and the Pappas once was reported to have referred to “swimming” as “staying alive in water”!

I can relate to that. As much as I love the water and being in and around it, I’m not a very confident swimmer. In fact, my earliest recollection of swimming is being pulled out of a pool by an adult, after I had somehow wandered into the deep end and found that I was not getting to the surface as quickly as I would have liked!

Yes, “staying alive in water.”

The easy parallels to water as imperatives to physical life and the “living waters” as imperatives to meaningful spiritual life flow easily.

Water. It’s always in movement. The hydrologic cycle, also known as the water cycle, describes the continuous movement of water on, above, and below the surface of the Earth.¹

The United States Geological Survey of the U.S. Department of the Interior, source for much of this information states: “Since the water cycle is truly a “cycle,” there is no beginning or end. Water can change states among liquid, vapor, and ice at various places in the water cycle, with these processes happening in the blink of an eye and over millions of years.”

It goes on to say, that “although the balance of water on Earth remains fairly constant over time, individual water molecules can come and go in a hurry. The

¹ [U.S. Department of the Interior | U.S. Geological Survey](http://ga.water.usgs.gov/edu/mearth.html)
URL: <http://ga.water.usgs.gov/edu/mearth.html>

water in the apple you ate yesterday may have fallen as rain half-way around the world last year or could have been used 100 million years ago by Mama Dinosaur to give her baby a bath.”

Or used by Mama Cass to drink on a hot California-Dremin’ sort of day.

A cycle. Life.

Eckert Tolle in his book *The Power of Now*² refers to life, at one point, as having no opposite. Birth and death are opposites, he says, yes, but life.... Life continues, rearranged, reconstituted in another form; a cycle, perhaps, but more, I think. The words and concepts are really only pointers to all this.

We have the idea, some of us, the idea that we can somehow quantify it all, capture it in a snapshot, webpage, or other elaborate way – setting it aside and sort of saying, there – got it – it’s sometimes an idea that constricts our thinking, compelling us ever forward to the next item on the list, and the next, and the next...

There is never such a thing as totally capturing anything.

Back to the water’s edge. The US Geological Survey tells us that there is, on this planet and in its atmosphere 326 million cubic miles of water. All water.

Fresh water: Think of all the inland seas, rivers, and lakes you can imagine. Yesterday, I was in Rochester for a meeting of That All May Freely Serve. Just flying over that swath of New York State en route to our gathering, it was easy to see hundreds of bodies of water reflecting the sun from high above. Add up all those lakes and every fresh water body on the earth and you will amass over 60,000 cubic miles of water. With each cubic mile equaling approximately a trillion gallons of water, you get the idea. It’s what we can easily see.

Yet, that figure evaporates next to the water we don’t see stored in the Earth – over 2,000,000 more cubic miles of fresh water – most of which is within a half mile of the Earth’s surface. Liminaly present, so to speak. And, let’s not forget glaciers, ice caps, and snow which account for another 7,000,000 cubic miles of fresh water on the Earth’s surface, and, well, suddenly we wonder why we aren’t all – fish!

Cycle of life and that which supports us far beyond our imagination.

You know, I think that folks in Jonah’s times and Jesus’ time were more aware of this vast, mysterious, intriguing aspect of the sea and the water supply. I think they got the connection better, if only because there were less distractions.

² <http://www.eckharttolle.com/home.php>

In some ways, they must have stood at the water's edge and let their mind go, with no limits or containment to how much water there was or what it contained – or the power beyond it.

As there should be, there are always such investigating mysteries as best they can.

In the early 6th century C.E., Cosmas Indicopleustes, a Greek sailor, amassed a work that attempted to describe the topography of the Earth based on Christian teachings. In this excerpt, he defends the biblical structure of the earth, refuting the idea that it might just be spherical in shape.

IT is written: In the beginning God made the heaven and the earth. We therefore first depict along with the earth, the heaven which is vaulted and which has its extremities bound together with the extremities of the earth. To the best of our ability we have endeavoured to delineate it on its western side and its eastern; for these two sides are walls, extending from below to the vault above. There is also the firmament which, in the middle, is bound together with the first heaven, and which, on its upper side, has the waters according to divine scripture itself. To the extremities on the four sides of the earth the heaven is fastened at its own four extremities, making the figure of a cube, that is to say, a quadrangular figure, while up above it curves round in the form of an oblong vault and becomes as it were a vast canopy. And in the middle the firmament is made fast to it, and thus two places are formed.

I sometimes wonder if the defense of Biblical geography was at its best – at its truest – an attempt to simply point to letting go.

I wonder, if in fact, that was what the nuns were referring to in grammar school when I would ask questions about, “How could this or that be?” and the answer from them would be a sometimes hushed, sometimes frustrated: “It’s a mystery!”

Yet, isn't it true that all things in their most quantum of forms is beyond our ability to quantify, explain, replicate? Sure, we can figure out the hydrologic cycle and know that fairly well; even estimating with some accuracy the quantity of water on, in, and on top of the Earth. But, which molecule of water just fell, and where was it before it fell this time, and was it the first drop... and so on.

It is that deep and presiding truth that we cannot know what is beyond that drives us to disprove such a notion or sends others into apoplexy.

We do need to know and learn of our surroundings and continue to use the brain that God gave us however it was done – to continue our mission and work on this planet – from entertainment to etymology; yet there is a point that the brain

reaches limits and then we discover again that we are not our mind, that in fact we are more.

It happens when we suspend the unending thought process and listen to what else is there; listening in a way that has a different meaning; hearing in a way that has no sounds. Is it the soul? Intuition? Vision? A knowing? Yes, no – I don't know. It's there in the first heaven of Cosmas, above the canopy or in the hidden depths of the waters we never see – but know it is there.

That place. From that same place that came the call to Jonah to go to the Gentiles and prophesy a message of repentance and redemption, which he first refused. Why? Because they were Gentiles, and even though God was sending him on the mission, Jonah, while personally helpful to all – because he was taught that is what you do – did not want God to save the foreigners.

Sound familiar? Welcome. Be with us. But, we're sorry, you can't participate fully because, well, you've been condemned by God, but in the meantime, let us be kind to you.

Phooey!

And, Phooey God said to Jonah. Into the depths and the mystery of the waters he went, into the belly of a great fish – for in great mysteries – anything is possible! And later, he was spat on the shore and finally did what God called him to do. And when he was successful and the Ninevites/Assyrians did respond and repent and seek God – was Jonah happy? No. Because Jonah had somehow been complicit in saving a people who for so long had been one of the many groups that had oppressed and marginalized his community in all kinds of wars and invasions.

Listen to some of the closing words of the Book of Jonah:

When God saw what they [the Ninevites] did, how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and God did not do it. (3:10)

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly; and he was angry. (4:1)

In the end of the Book, Jonah goes out to sulk and watch the city from a distance. It was hot and the sun beat down upon him. And by where he sat, God caused a great plant to grow up in a day and give him shade, and the same Scripture says, "He was exceedingly glad because of the plant." (4:6) However, the next day the plant was gone and Jonah was so distraught by the heat that he began to feel faint and asked of God to take his life.

It is better for me to die than to live. But God said to Jonah, “Do you well to be angry for the plant?” And Jonah said, “I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.” And the Lord said, “You pity the plant for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night, and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 people who did not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?” (4: 8-11)

And there, with Jonah, head down, shuffling his feet, sullen like a child, chided by God – the Book ends.

No answer needed. God will do what God chooses to do, and when God wants us to move in a certain direction, somehow the great mystery and call is heard – or even insisted upon. The Bible is always about God’s influence in the world and secondly about our response. It is why the calling of Jesus is so different, in that believing that somehow Jesus was one with God and the Spirit in ways that are beyond our ability to know, he became God on Earth in the mission, ministry, and teachings that we follow here today. We are all God on Earth, just as all the water that was ever present is here on Earth, but Jesus was somehow different.

Unlike Jonah, when Jesus was called he listened and he called others and they listened and in this morning’s readings – followed, listening, perhaps, to the promise of a kingdom they perceived in their limited ways might one day might make them earthly royalty, but also to something else they heard, beyond their ability to explain. By the water from which they made their livelihood, they accepted a path to depths greater than they had ever imagined. In so doing, they became part of and connected to something much greater than any previous mystery they knew as part of the ancient, magical world.

And so I think it is true today for many. Living in a sort of desert, happy with an oasis or two and a happy supply of figs, yet just beyond the waters we see there waits something so great, powerful, and transformative that all we need to do is to know it is there; suspend our computer of a mind and feel it from what we have always been – human form filled with the essence of God, for this time, but with of God always.

And when we move in the direction of just trying to touch that, to know it in a way that leaves our calculations behind, then we can practice the ancient greeting with transcendence:

“Namasthe: The Spirit in Me, Greet the Spirit in You.”

It is still, I think, staying alive in water. The waters of the Eternal and Gracious God that brings us here. And we begin to embrace this ineffable part of who we are when we stop thinking so much, and listen to the essence in the music we

hear or sing, the paths we walk, the ways we meditate, or however we step back in conscious ways – to know what consciousness can never define.

When we do, something always happens. It is already happening here!

It begins, as Namasthe! Amen

In preparing this sermon, I came across the following quote, which I didn't use today, but which I didn't want to lose, ether:

In the fourth century, Science and orthodox Christianity came to a deadlock, the bone of contention being the idea of the sphericity of the earth. Criticizing the ancient theory of the roundness of the earth, Lactantius, one of the most polished rhetoricians among the Christians, indignantly inquired:

"Is it possible that men can be so absurd as to believe that the crops and trees on the other side of the earth hang downward, and that men have their feet higher than their heads? If you ask them how they defend those monstrosities, how things do not fall away from the earth on that side, they reply that the nature of things is such that heavy bodies tend toward the center, like the spokes of a wheel, while light bodies tend from the center to the heavens on all sides. Now I am really at a loss what to say of those, who, when they have once gone wrong, steadily persevere in their folly and defend one absurd opinion by another."³

³ <http://www.wisdomworld.org/setting/saccas.html>