

‘God’s Promise and the Sea of Life’  
Advent 1B  
26 February, 2012  
Genesis 9:8-17  
Mark 1:9-15  
Wheatley United Reformed Church

One of the things I miss, living where we do, is the lack of a shoreline within walking distance. Which may seem unlikely, because arguably, two of the most terrifying moments of my life happened at the beach. Nearly ten years ago, I was with a group of other young parents from our church, enjoying a day out at Duxbury Beach in Massachusetts. It was a perfect day for it, early on in the summer: blue sky, quite warm but not baking hot. The waves were gentle and regular, picking up just a little force as the tide brought the coastline ever closer to us with gentle slaps and pulls.

Kit and Finny were blissfully happy: they had playmates, plastic sand buckets with shovels, and skin that was bare except for the obligatory thin layer of sunscreen. Joel and I were having a great time, too. Seven and a half months pregnant, I was planted like a beached whale in my low-slung chair, toes in the sand, with a wide view of the shoreline where the boys were busy playing as I chatted with new friends, swapping parenting stories and tales of our own childhoods. I'm sure I was laughing at someone's latest remark when Joel walked up and asked, "Tanya, where's Kit?"

Immediately, I panicked: I hadn't kept my eyes on him for the last minute or two, and the beach was crowded. All I could see was a mass of bodies, but none that looked like our 5-year old son. I found the adrenaline-fuelled energy to thunder down to the shoreline, shouting like a crazed mother. Joel ran into the water as well, back and forth, scanning beneath the surface and around the bobbing heads, for a little figure that might have tripped and been sucked under.

In that moment, my terror had placed me back on Rehoboth Beach, further south along the Atlantic coastline in Delaware, ten years before that. Growing up in the upper Midwest, I'd been to a couple of lakes, but had never visited the seaside before. That summer in 1992, I was visiting my friend Eva, whose family lived close to Rehoboth, before we travelled together to explore Boston, where I had committed to spending my next three years studying for my theological degree.

Rehoboth Beach was not terribly occupied that day—no safety in the numbers of people who might see a struggling swimmer—and the sky was dark and threatening. Still, we were at the beach and it was obligatory to swim, if only to say that I'd done it. It was my first experience of swimming amongst the waves, and the couple of times I was able to time it right and ride the wave for even a second was a huge rush.

One thing I hadn't been warned of, but afterward felt I should have known, was the frightening authority of an undertow. I had moved a bit further out into the water in order to get behind the building waves, so I could swim into them as they crested. I was, I thought, starting to get the hang of this—starting to feel like I could be a little bit in control of the situation. And this next wave was really big one—I had visions of body surfing it all the way into shore!

Unfortunately, I didn't see a smaller wave coming up just behind it—but it crested and crashed into the wave I was attempting to ride, and the weight of the smaller one pressed me

below the surface as the wave I was riding also crashed. I felt myself being dragged under and backward with incredible force. There was no breaking free from it, no matter how much I kicked and thrashed against it. I needed air, but couldn't loosen the grip of the water around my ankles. And as it drew me back further and further into the deep, images of my life—and death—flashed before me. I was just beginning to think that, despite having narrowly passed my life-saving course in swimming lessons, I was going to drown that day. The life that had a burgeoning plan and order to it was going to be snuffed out before I was ready.

Just at that moment, I was thrust to the surface. Choking and gasping for air, I struggled to make my way back to the shore. The whole event probably took less than a few minutes--though it felt like an eternity. Once back safely on the rocky shoreline, I collapsed and fought back the tears of relief and exhaustion as my friend laughed and said, "Oh, I should have told you about riptides and the undertow! You definitely have to be careful of those!" No kidding.

Of course, no one else on the Duxbury shoreline knew the chaos that was going on in my mind as I screamed Kit's name and ran back and forth imagining him suffering a similar sort of trauma. My guilt was compounded by feelings of horror and shame for having neglected my parental responsibility for a moment—how could I possibly have thought laughter was appropriate just a few moments before?! Naively, I vowed (as one does in such moments) in my fervent prayer that I'd be a much better mother if I could only have him back safe and sound.

It took about eight minutes, but another member of our group eventually found Kit a hundred metres or so up the beach, happily chatting with some strangers—who no doubt were asking where his parents were. There was a *deja vu* moment of collapse when Kit was returned, where I was once again fighting back tears, thanking God for life, and grace, for that real-time experience of salvation and second chances--alongside a heart-stopping awareness that it only takes a moment for all of life to move from being pleasant and full of laughter, to experiencing the crushing weight of chaos threatening to suck it right out of you.

I don't know whether it's the case here in Great Britain so much, but in the U.S., the image of the rainbow curving over Noah's ark with its big door flung open, pairs of animals spilling out into a bright new world is painted or hung on the walls of many a church crèche or nursery. "We offer this story as a central message of God's love and hope to our children, starting at the earliest ages. It's telling that we want them to know that, even in the midst of the worst chaos, God will never forget them."<sup>1</sup>

The story of the great flood resonates very deeply in the human psyche. Although it didn't always feature a character named Noah, it was a story held in common by many of the world's earliest civilizations. "In the ancient Near Eastern world, turbulent water was the symbol of ultimate . . . chaos. A vast and terrorizing flood was viewed as a return to the primordial chaos out of which the world had been created in the first place."<sup>2</sup>

From the very beginning of anything remembered by humankind, water has symbolised both chaos, and life-source. The very first verses of our own story in Genesis describe earth's beginnings as being "a formless void, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind

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1 Jane Anne Ferguson, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 2, p. 28.

2 Dianne Bergant, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 2, p. 27.

from God swept over the face of the waters."<sup>3</sup>

From that primordial soup, the Spirit of God fashioned everything we know, brought order to the chaos, and endowed us with being, with life.

The desire from the beginning was that the Spirit that fashioned us should also be in relationship with us. Our Christian tradition teaches us that we were made for God, so that we might know and share mutual love: the divine order was established so that life might flourish, and love might abound.

But with the freedom we were given, human beings made devastating choices that resulted in the disintegration of God's life-giving order, sending creation spiraling back down toward the chaotic void from which it was drawn.

Deeply grieved and angered over the devastation, and over the resistance of the human heart to know and share love—so our story goes—God resolved to start over: the destroyers would be destroyed, save for a righteous remnant, and the earth would be restored to a watery chaos from which a new and more faithful people would emerge.

But here is the unexpected wonder and grace of the story; here is the element that set Israel's flood story apart from the rest. Once the flood subsided, God discovered that retribution had not resolved the issue. God's heart still grieved; it was still broken over humankind's hard-heartedness. Punishment had not coerced humankind into changing its ways . . . and God realised that if their relationship was to continue, then *God* must change. And as you read the story, you realise that God *does* change, in a most astonishing and wondrous move.

Pastor, author and story-teller Jane Anne Ferguson describes it this way: "God repents, turns from vindication to forgiveness, patience, and steadfast love for creation and for humanity, despite the knowledge that the human heart may (will?) never change. The creatures made in God's image may always resist God. Yet God lays down God's weapons against creation, against humankind. God puts the undrawn bow in the clouds as a personal reminder 'never again' to destroy creation with a flood. In the light of that bow, the rainbow, humanity can see God as 'One Who Remembers,' even in the midst of chaos, even in the midst of rebellion by creation and its creatures."<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, in the covenant that God makes with Noah, God willingly becomes vulnerable, going even to such lengths as sacrificing divine freedom, for the sake of love and relationship with this world and its people. Setting aside the role of simply being creator, God binds God's self to humankind and our destiny as the protective promise is made: "Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth."<sup>5</sup>

That's not to say that chaos was to be a thing of the past. Obviously, it's hardly an ancient phenomenon. "Corporately, we know chaos in our twenty-first-century world through terrorism

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3 Genesis 1:2.

4 Jane Anne Ferguson, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 2, p. 28.

5 Genesis 9:11

and war, through ecological and natural disasters, and through the gross inequality of the distribution of resources and wealth among the world's many peoples. Individually, chaos comes into our lives through relationships broken by death, estrangement, and divorce, through illness of body or mind, through addictions of all kinds.<sup>6</sup> We experience chaos as a result of paying attention to too many things, or not paying close enough attention to the right things.

“Much of this chaos we bring on ourselves,” points out Rev’d. Ferguson, “through our resistance to God’s ways. To see and know God as the ‘One Who Remembers’ us, corporately and individually, with love and forgiveness in the midst of life’s chaos with all its pain and suffering, is to discover redemption. Hearing this story on the first Sunday of Lent we begin our walk with Jesus toward Jerusalem, understanding in a deeper, fuller way the God who sent him and whom he served.”<sup>7</sup>

The words that Jesus heard as the heavens were torn open and a dove descended upon him—just as a dove had lit on Noah, bearing an affirming message of life, hope, and a new beginning—Jesus went on to express with everything he had, ultimately even his very life. It was the culmination of the same message God has been communicating since the days of Noah: God has thrown God’s lot in with us and for us, neither counting nor sparing any cost. We are loved. And God is pleased with us, in spite of ourselves. Best of all, God will never forget that promise, even if we do: the rainbow and the resurrection bear witness.

As we journey into this liturgical season of Lent, here are some questions to think about: What would our lives and our world look like if we took this promise seriously? Would they be any different?

As we journey through these six weeks of intentional repentance and reflection, what if we allowed our own hearts to be remade in the image of God’s heart?

What if we allowed ourselves to be a people who let *our* hearts be broken open, with grief over our own hard-heartedness and the hard-heartedness of the world and its chaos?

When our hearts were broken open, might we be moved to partner with our Creator through patient, forgiving, loving, and prophetic action for the renewal of all creation?

There are so many for whom the chaotic forces of life threaten to overtake them, like waves crashing in on unwitting and unprepared swimmers at sea. How will you and I allow ourselves to be led, loved, empowered, transformed, and transforming agents, who know and live God’s life-affirming promise?

May the faithful ‘One Who Remembers’ help us. Amen.

Rev’d. Tanya N. Stormo Rasmussen

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<sup>6</sup> Jane Anne Ferguson, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 2, p. 28.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. Questions that follow were inspired by the same.