

“Deep Water”

The Third Sunday after Epiphany – 1.24.21 – Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Mark 1:14-20/B

When I was a youngster, my great aunt owned a cottage on the shore of Lake Huron. Occasionally, my family would get to go visit her there during the summer, and, only knowing the muddy banks of rivers and lakes in Missouri, you can imagine my fascination with the smooth stones of a lake of that size. No mud, no grass, just smooth stones that covered both the bottom of the lake and stretched up onto the shore offering hours of recreation and creation that smooth stones offer to youngsters of all ages. At the end of our long, lazy days we would gather in the great room of the cottage (ok, it was more like a house) where there was a floor to ceiling fireplace, made of (you guessed it) smooth lake stones that Huron had produced for our enjoyment.

I remember one vacation more than the others, because after the first few visits, my sister and I were familiar enough and old enough to join in the cousin fun as soon as we could unpack and put on our swimsuits. There is an indelible memory I have of running down the dock as fast as I could to jump off and into the lake. No fear. No pausing. No thoughts of safety. Just the exhilarating leap of faith into waters that I thought I knew so well. But this time, as my feet parted the water with a great splash, and I went down into the cool part of the depths of the lake, I suddenly felt that I should have touched bottom sooner. My trajectory was down, the lake water was dark, and there was nothing below me. I started to fear. My lungs were beginning to burn. Then, thankfully my toes touched those smooth stones and I pushed against them with all my might and shot up to the surface, gasping for breath and glad to be young and brave and alive.

These past few weeks have been momentous for our beloved country. From the disruption of time-honored rituals, to violence, to resolve. From all three of the branches of our government trying valiantly to stay focused on their duties, to impeachment, to protection, to inauguration, to the accomplishment of an historic transfer of power. We have screamed and shed tears of frustration or of joy, and reacted with a thousand different emotions we’ve all experienced since we turned the calendars from 2020 to 2021.

So, where do you find yourself today?

Are you running with abandon to jump into familiar waters

or sitting at the end of the dock testing the water with your toes?

Are you mid-air before a fearful plunge into unknown depths,

or slipping into something that feels akin to comfortable old shoes?

Are you pushing up from smooth stones at the bottom of the descent,

or sinking quickly into the anticipated, but uncontrolled darkness?

No matter what emotions you are feeling today, no matter how you are viewing the future that stretches out before us as Americans, or the effects of a global pandemic on the whole human family, we have one thing in common: we are called. We are called by whatever invites us or pulls us into tomorrow – whether we name it God or “something greater than ourselves” or Fate – we are feeling the days of decision ahead. Days of deep water, no matter how we plan to make sense of it.

The Ancients imagined the sea – the symbol of deep water – as counter to Creation and just as powerful. From the very beginning, we have heard stories of the struggle of life. “In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a void – formless - and the Spirit of God *brooded* over the face of the deep. Then God said, ‘Let there

be Light! And there was light.” But the deep was there already. And it came to pass that centuries later, people had learned how to venture into the deep to survive. The Gospels record how God used some of these folks in powerful ways, as Jesus begins the invitation to discipleship.

The story from last week shifts - from Jesus’ baptism by John on the outskirts of Jerusalem where the wealth and status of the region of Judea was centered - to a seashore in the northern region of the Galilee, where almost everyone was either a fisherman or a tenant farmer, working for their primary client, Rome. In Mark, it is clear that even within the fishing community, there were some, like Peter and Andrew, whose operation involved casting nets from a shared boat. At the same time, just down the beach, was the fishing company of Zebedee and Sons, who were obviously more fortunate in their business resources. And yet Jesus called them **both** to Follow Me! and they had to make a choice. They had to turn away from the life they had lived, the only life they knew, and do something new. As they worked the deep waters of the Galilee, they had to have felt the sinking feeling of their lives going down to the bottom, when Jesus reached out and pulled them from the sea much like God rescued Jonah from the belly of the whale. An experience like that perhaps might make it easier and help us turn around and choose wisely.

Changing minds is one of the creative works of God. In fact, it is one of the gifts we share – part of the Image of God that we bear – to be free to choose and change and grow. So it was that Jonah changed his mind, and finally set out to preach God’s love even to his enemies in Nineveh. And then, the people of Nineveh believed God - through Jonah’s word – and repented, changed their ways. When God saw how those people turned away from evil and towards God, (even) **God changed his mind** and the plan for their destruction.

In just a few minutes we will baptize Lavinia, and welcome her into our community as a sister in Christ. Through this water, from a font made of smooth river stones, she will receive the power of the Holy Spirit in her life, and a calling to follow love and someday recognize it as her own – having travelled from life to death to new life with Jesus as her constant companion and friend. And she will – as each of us has – choose how to live out Jesus’ invitation to follow through the shallows and the depths that come with human living.

We are in the midst of deep water, my friends. And whether you feel like you are willingly jumping in, going down to the depths of the unknown or pushing off the rocks swimming upward to be able to breathe again, **you belong to God**. And nowhere do we learn more about the struggle – our journey – than in God’s Word. Not because the Bible tells us how to live. But because the Bible shares the story of God’s search for us. Each of us.

Jonah knew that he’d been called and turned and ran the other way. But when his choice got him thrown overboard, God sent the ruler of the deep to bring him back to land. Peter got brave one night and decided to walk on top of the water. He sank, until the strong arms of his Savior gripped his hand and pulled him back into a loving embrace. The disciples had tried everything they knew to make life worth living in the midst of injustice, occupation, famine, disease and crushing poverty that threatened to drown them in the deep, until God came and called them to his side. Just as we are called. To come to be with Jesus. To learn about God from him. To be strengthened for the task by his very body and blood. And to share in the amazing work of healing suffering and division, reconciling what human choices have damaged, bringing care and comfort to the broken things. We are called. And we must choose.

So, no matter where you are today - no matter how you are feeling about what has been unfolding - please know that God loves you, and that there is a place for you in this community of faith. We belong to God who gave us life, who calls us to kingdom work, and who does not fear the deep... Somewhere in your home you have a blue stone that came from Advent's baptismal font. Find it. Carry it with you. Let it remind you of the smooth stones of strength and belonging that God has left for you all over your life. They are calling you to purpose. For even when you want to turn away. Even when you are silent - the stones will shout. "If you have ears to hear..." Amen.

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