

“Standing in the Deluge”

Sermon for June 1st, 2008 by the Rev. Joe Summers

I was struck several weeks ago by Madeline’s description of the process by which she came to feel this church might be a spiritual home for her. The word “hooked” normally has a negative connotation to me--someone or something trying to control you--but as Madeline expressed it, she felt hooked by different kinds of expressions of love and caring that became emotional ties--bonds of affection--which have meant a lot to her, and which have helped strengthen her. Her description of “being hooked” gave me a whole new feel for what Jesus’ call to be fishers of people might be about. Given how it’s been used by people in our culture, it was hard for me to hear that phrase without its sounding like some kind of objectification or manipulation of people. But Madeline’s words have now helped me hear it another way, as about people become hooked into--connected to--the divine in a way that doesn’t deny their individuality, their autonomy, their dignity, but which strengthens and affirms them.

I’ve had similar trouble with the word “Saved” and “Savior” in the past. Mostly what I could hear was some kind of denial of equality, some kind of encouragement of passivity. Then three years ago on a beach in Delaware I was saved by a lifeguard after I got caught in a rip tide. That life guard saved me. He was my savior. That’s not saying anything about him being better than me, more worthy than me. That’s not saying I was totally passive. I tried to be as helpful as I could be!! It’s simply a fact. And now it’s a little easier for me to own the ways Jesus has saved me, has helped guide me and lead me through some deadly situations.

One of the places we get hung up on this language of being saved is that it’s become fused not only with some kind of domination model in which Jesus is everything and we are nothing, or it’s been connected to a kind of magical theology where all that’s important is life after our biological death and in which certain incantations will almost guarantee our entrance into a future heaven. But if you read the gospels, I think you’ll find that almost always, when Jesus was using the language of being saved, he was using it the way the psalms use it--as being saved from some very concrete danger or death-dealing reality. The psalms again and again are prayers for deliverance from things like domination, isolation, oppression, hunger, exploitation, shame, betrayal, terror, murderous wrath--realities that I think most people would be hard pressed not to want to be saved from. I suspect, if people thought that coming to this church could help save them from such realities, there would be far more people here.

This brings me to the metaphor we have at the heart of our scriptures today, the metaphor of the flood, the deluge.

In Genesis we hear that God destroys the earth with a flood because the earth is filled with violence. If you took the story literally it would be a little hard to understand how killing everyone was the answer to people killing each other but...I think it’s not mean to be taken literally. Rather, it’s a story about how upset God is by violence. It’s a story about God’s determination to not be caught up in that cycle of violence by making a covenant never again to destroy the

earth--as symbolized by the rainbow.

In the psalm we encounter the image of fearsome floods before whose wrath even mountains tremble and dissolve. There is also this powerful image of not being afraid, even in the midst of such destruction--of the river of God sustaining us and giving us strength, even in the midst of such realities.

Then we have the gospel where Jesus speaks of those who build their houses on the rock, so that when the flood comes, their houses stand, versus those who build on sand and whose houses collapse, when the floods come.

I think these floods are metaphors for all the devastating realities we can encounter in life.

There is a superstition that says that if I'm righteous, like Noah, then floods won't happen to me.

Jesus rejected that idea. As he says "The rain falls on the just and the unjust." That means good rains fall on both the just and the unjust and torrential downpours fall on both. And it's because floods are going to happen in our lives, that we really need to think about the ground of our lives; what really can sustain us in and through such times.

Here is one of those times where I think Paul got it right.

If we try to stand on our own righteousness we will be lost. But if we stand on God's righteousness, God's mercy, God's love--nothing can ultimately harm us. That word "ultimately" needs to be emphasized, because Paul went through an awful lot of things that most people would experience as harmful: numerous imprisonments, countless beatings which often left him near death with lashes from the Jewish authorities and Rods by the Roman authorities. Once he was even stoned. Four time he was shipwrecked - once for a night and a day he was adrift at sea. Paul describes his life as one of constant danger, often without food, often exposed without shelter to terrible heat or cold. Indeed, even while Paul is waiting to be executed, he's still writing to others about how glad he is that he's been saved from the lion's den--not had to face any temptation too great to bear.

We still seem prone to the superstition that suffering means that God is somehow against us. If Paul believed that, he would have given up long before. Instead there is this joy: the joy of life eternal--love eternal. It is the joy that leads Paul to say, "Now we see things as though through a dark and cloudy glass, but one day we shall see face to face, now we know in part--then we shall understand fully---(and here is the kicker) even as we have been fully understood."

In other words, Paul goes through life with a sense of being fully understood by God. That's so powerful to me! Think of the last time you felt really understood. Even the idea of it gives me strength and hope and joy.

That experience of being understood, accepted and affirmed by God-- is for Paul the rock that leads to such a great trust in God. It's a trust so great that last week we heard Paul say to those in the Corinthian church--don't judge me, I don't even judge myself, because I've put all my trust in the judgment of God. Imagine going through life not judging others or yourself. So much energy is lost and consumed in such judgments. Being free of that, it is no wonder Paul feels so much excitement and energy and passion to keep on going. Life without such judgment is permission to live life freely and wholly.

Here I want to note the story of a friend of mine who for years was possessed by a terrible anger that left him simply trying, all the time, not to do anything that might trigger it. This meant he tended to avoid school work, jobs, commitments, expectations. Instead he tried to spend most of his time simply hanging out with his friends, because that was when he felt least controlled by his anger. Ultimately, that didn't work, as he got caught up in addiction and violence. One day in a prison cell, just like in the movies, he saw a flaming hand write the words Romans 3:23. When he looked it up he found that it said these words : "there is no distinction, because all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." He said that, for the first time, he felt free of his wrath, not that it was gone, but that it was no longer him. He could see himself apart from it. His life has never been the same since.

For Paul, God, God's righteousness, God's love, God's new creation is the rock of his life. Feeling that new creation is what really matters, he can focus on how he can help nurture and foster it. It allows him to not have his life bound and constrained by his personal limitations or foibles, his radical imperfectness, his temper, etc. In fact, for Paul, part of the paradox is that, in his experience, God seems to work better through his weaknesses than through his strengths, so that the weaker he is--the more totally human--the better. Thinking that whether he is right or wrong pales in importance to the new creation, so he can go out and take risks and make mistakes.

Obviously, we could turn these ideas into a kind of blanket pass to be irresponsible, to be uncaring, to lack integrity--as many of those in the Corinthian church seemed prone to do. The call to not judge people could be used as an excuse to not judge situations or issues. There we need to be as clear as possible--- so we don't want to do that. But imagine the power, if our judging issues and situations was no longer connected to judging others or being judged. Let us hear and experience the power of life lived not on the sandy soil of personal righteousness or unrighteousness, but on the grounds of giving our all to see that God's commonwealth might grow on earth as it is in heaven.

Let us hear the song of Joy and Hope and Love and Freedom that happens when we can let go of viewing life as some kind of test about whether we are worthy or unworthy, good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable, and come to a place where we simply accept the mysterious nature of God's acceptance and love for us that is based on loving us for who we are--not because we're better or worse than others.

It's the kind of passionate freedom we hear Carter Heyward speak of when she wrote:

“That sense of bubbling over joy and passion--is what we're needing if we're really going to be able to challenge the structure of fear, the ideologies of fear, that govern our lives and world and that lead us collectively and individually to harm one another and harm creation.”

Let us stand on the rock of trust, radical acceptance, love, hope, and faith--that in the midst of the deluges, the floods, we will continue to encounter in our lives and world, we might have life abundant, and bring life abundant, to all.

For, if we are willing, God is able, and if we are ready, God has already gone ahead to prepare a way for us.