

July 5, 2020
Sixteenth Sunday of Online Worship

Rev. Nancy Lincoln Reynolds

What Do We Long For?

Genesis 1: 1-10
Galatians 5:1
John 8: 31



Wind and Water by Jacques Joseph Tissot

What is it that we long for? Lately the answer to that question seems to lie in the foundation of the celebration we had just yesterday... the Fourth of July. We long for freedom...freedom from the fear and consequences of the current pandemic...freedom from oppression, violence and hatred... freedom from racism in the presence of both individuals and systems...freedom from the confines of lockdown, quarantine, and the removal of everyday “normal” activities. We want to live as God created us to live...in the freedom of choice, free will, and faithfulness.

God was all about that, you see, at Creation. God pulled things apart, separating and reforming the land and the waters and thus unleashing beauty, form, and design. It was in this way that we read about at the beginning of Genesis...the beginning of all things...that the dome of sky above and the seas below were set and we were given a boundless structure within which to thrive. And whether you take the Creation story literally or see Adam and Eve as human archetypes and metaphor, we all can agree that the beginning of things/of life results in our sharing equally as we are made....men and women being made or evolving together from common stuff.

I can only imagine Woods member, Mike Moomaw who was integral in the team that discovered water on Mars, cringing at my use of the quite unscientific reference to Creation’s material as “stuff.” Truth is, that material...that stuff...is primarily and essentially water... “mayim,” in the Hebrew.

Over the next six weeks, while Pastor Susan is on sabbatical, Jacob, Elizabeth, and I will be wading in the waters of Creation as we consider the Biblical use of water as primal and integral in the sustaining of who we are: biologically/scientifically and theologically in our religious symbols and covenants. Specifically we will be using Biblical text to inform us about the significance of water in creation, redemption, and revelation. These are the essential ways in which God interfaces and interacts with us...creation, redemption and revelation. Put in other words, we are reflecting on how God has used water to create and uphold us in the essence of who we are; how God is able to bring good out of the poor choices we make because we are creatures of free will (kind of like bringing order out of chaos again); and how we are enabled to grow in faith such that we grow in our striving to become more holy...all of this from water. Rabbi Edelheit in “A Midrash on Water” says that, “Water (Mayim) is a central metaphor for God’s presence and human struggle.” I think he is correct...and we want to wade around in this, looking at the stories of the Bible wherein God interacts within history on our behalf: creation,

redemption and revelation. I would encourage you to spend some time after worship today seeing how many stories of water you can remember in the Bible and talk about God's presence in them.

This morning I am focusing on the creative process of water that yields life. God calls it "good," ultimately, and we may be encouraged by this I think. Creation implies all kinds of possibility, especially when we recognize that creation goes hand in hand with the freedom we long for. Really there are no limits to creation. We were created with free will...including the freedom to choose how we think about things...and, quickly on the heels of that creation, we abuse that freedom. When God attempted to place some restrictions upon us in the Garden by basically saying, "You may eat anything you want...except from THAT tree," we did it anyway because we could...and we wanted to. And this exercise of freedom continues with us: choosing to do things that are not good for us or others just because we want to or because we can...freedom. Conversely perhaps, in choosing to follow the gospel of Jesus Christ, we may do what is good for us even when we don't want to because we should and we can. Freedom is a tricky business and responsibility for it is complicated. There are always choices to be made, and they are required in order for us to be moral human beings. Some choices we make are good ones while others are not so good...even devastating. That is the nature of freedom.

Like freedom, water is found in the Bible to be a vehicle that can both save us and destroy us. The gentle rivers in the Garden of Eden and life-supporting oases and wells of water in the deserts, and baptismal waters of the Jordan offer life; while the floods of Noah's time and Pharaoh's use of the water of the Nile to drown children take it away. There are many other Biblical examples that warn us and remind us that water, while abundant, must be used and handled thoughtfully. Rabbi Edelheit suggests, based upon the story of Noah and the Ark, that:

"...we can destroy ourselves, save ourselves and remain forever hopeful all based on the seeming insignificance of a raindrop. It was the perversity of humankind that brings on the floods and then it is Noah's faithfulness and rigorousness that builds the Ark that saves humanity."

We have the freedom always to choose, and because we are possessors of free will, we can never take for granted our behavior in the water. We will not always make good choices. Human behavior always has the potential of both disaster and salvation. The Bible reminds us of that clearly, example after example.

There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, "Morning, boys. How's the water?" And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and asks, "What the heck is water?" Water gives them life and sustains them. Their surroundings, their life source...that which allows them to live...this is water.

Our freedom is the same as the water for those fish. We so take it for granted that we don't even really know what it means and what responsibilities it places upon us. The Apostle Paul, however, has a good sense of the nature of freedom. He tells us in Galatians that:

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast, therefore, and do not submit to a yoke of slavery.

Slavery, being the opposite of freedom, Paul tells us we have an obligation to not let ourselves fall into habits of unChrist-like living. It would be a misuse of our freedom. We are to live in the truth of Jesus Christ for it is that and that only that really enables freedom. John 8:

“So Jesus said to the Jews who believed him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

The stage is set well for us from Creation to Christ. On the one hand God pronounces in God’s first words to us, *“It is good.”* And that is bookended by Christ’s LAST words, *“It is finished.”* But in between those brackets our lives can be chaotic and ambiguous. We are people in the process of becoming who we were created to be.

Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall said once that the Constitution of the United States was a flawed document at its inception because it accepted the universal and unacceptable reality of slavery. Interestingly enough, George Wallace, Governor of Alabama and politician who advocated segregation during the Civil Rights movement, also said that the best thing the framers of the Constitution could have done but did not, would have been to resolve the issue of slavery back in 1787. Peter Gomes, former minister of the Harvard Memorial Church, said that when these two agree on something, we should all pay attention. I believe he was right.

This is not to criticize the founding fathers, but to recognize that freedom always sits in a context, and that the REAL value of the Constitution evolved as the people...we...were allowed as the conscience of our nation to use that freedom wisely and well. The Constitution was and is not a “once and for all” enterprise. Freedom is an ever and slowly evolving process. As in the Bible, freedom has a beginning and an end and, most importantly, an ultimate purpose. For us as Christians, we must use this freedom to pursue that which God desires for us. For us as citizens of this country, we are invited to pursue the end and purpose of the Constitution: the enjoyment of domestic tranquility. We struggle with that lately...but it is the goal of our Constitution.

So what do we long for? We long for freedom and the life that God created for us. The truth is that we are the ones who must make that happen for ourselves, with God’s help. We must choose to live life as God intended and as the Bible instructs us. It is so easy to forget that God’s truth is all around us and that freedom is as abundant as water. Like the fish and their context of water in our earlier story, we take the context of truth and freedom for granted and so can forget about them. We must remind ourselves daily and say about our faith-filled choices every day: This is water. This is truth. This is freedom. Amen.