

Isaiah 35: 1-3a, 5-8a
Advent3C
December 11, 2016
Lincoln Street UMC

It was a clear and calm day. The sun was out in full spring glory, the waters sparkled and the motor on our ship hummed along as it made its way to the destination platform.

We were headed into the heart of the Great Barrier Reef. I had been on the ocean before - in all kinds of boats, for all kinds of reasons.

But despite this history, and living a mere 90 minute drive from the coast, I found myself having a hard time knowing what to expect.

Whatever I might have anticipated, I did not expect to be so transported. I found a lycra suit (protection from jelly fish stings) and flippers and a snorkel mask. I joined others on the platform as we all laughed at how awkward it was to move wearing so much gear in the midst of such a crowd. But soon I slipped into the warm ocean waters and had I not been wearing a snorkel tube, the gasp would have been audible (but perhaps life threatening!).

There was a whole world, in all its glory. Bouncing and bobbing in the gentle waves, I kicked out further from the platform, entranced by the water world opening up to me. I must have looked like a kid in a candy store, with my eyes bigger than saucers. Sounds dampened, this was an exploration for the eyes. Everywhere I looked were visions of grey, brown, green and orange coral - some looking like what you might expect coral to look like, others looking like enlarged underwater mushrooms. All of it new and magical.

I happily kicked around, losing track of my whereabouts and of the time.

I could have stayed for days out there. Content doesn't even begin to capture my feelings.

In one simple push off the dock I had been transported into a world beyond my hope. My snorkel tube and fins made me almost forget that I was a creature made for land, not water. With those simple tools I had discovered a whole new reality, not visible from above, just waiting for me to enter.

The water cradled and carried me, transported me to a completely new landscape.

Water. It's a powerful element. As Isaiah poetically foretells this morning, it can bring life where there was only death. 'Water will dance through the desert' so says the prophet, 'and bring life where there was nothing. Barren soil will bloom with flower, rushes and reeds, all because of water.'

We each have our own water stories. Coastlines that we visit in order to be restored. Experiences that we would describe as bringing us new life - swimming, kayaking, floating. We are naturally and instinctively drawn to water. Just like bees to honey - they forage over and over for more pollen but are always drawn back to their hives, their homes, their honey, instinctively.

We are so blessed here in Portland with water all around us - rivers out our backdoor, ocean just down the block, lakes on every corner. And I believe that we each know firsthand water as a home for our spirit. We long for it just like the bees do their honeyed homes.

Recently scientists have gone about proving this instinct to be neurologically true. Studies show that being near water makes us more relaxed, happier and more satisfied with life.¹ Even just pictures of water or even the color blue, suggests the reality of water enough that similar effects are noted in the brain. The benefits of water to us emotionally, psychologically are similar to that of dopamine release.

¹ All of the data regarding water in this sermon comes from Diana Butler Bass, *Grounded*, HarperOne, San Francisco, 2015, Chapter 2.

Water is a powerful element.

Water is a powerful element. It can carve canyons through what appears to be impenetrable stone. It can resurrect what seems dead. It can calm the nerves and inspire the soul.

So, if water is so powerful what does it mean that we are made up predominantly of water? 65-70% of us, in fact. What power lies waiting within us, waiting to be tapped?

Lao Tzu said long ago, "Nothing is softer or more flexible than water, yet nothing can resist it." Water slips around edges and under walls. It fills empty spaces, growing from the bottom up. It often does so without much of a sound, just slowly swelling, widening and changing the landscape.

When collected in enough mass water will break levies, dams, any barrier; creating new tributaries and topography. A flood of water can change the way everything looks. Have you ever looked out on a flooded horizon? Landmarks are no longer where you think they should be. And elements of the landscape stand out that you have never noticed before. (Remind me to tell you of the time I awoke in my parents' flooded basement.)

Water can disorient and reorient. Softly, subtly, it will wear down whatever is in its way.

We've heard a lot about walls in the last several months. One very large, imposing, ridiculous wall in particular. And I had the vision this week of water spilling over it like the levies in New Orleans.

Bringing down the wall and bringing down the divisions.

What would it mean for us to harness our water energy? How might we transform the political landscape with our witness? Our powerful collective witness?

The ancient nation of Israel was a small strip of land caught between powerful, imposing nations.

Isaiah spoke to a people who were feeling buffeted by powers beyond their control and they were

facing the all too possible reality of Assyrian conquest. The Assyrians had massive armies and gold to support them and they looked on that little strip of land with eager greed.

That little strip of land would boost their trade, give them access to new markets, increase their already ridiculous wealth. Beginning to sound a bit familiar?

Into this worry, anxiety and fear, Isaiah preaches a poetic word of comfort. Waters will break forth in the wilderness and there will be streams in the desert. The wilderness will blossom like the crocus.

And everything will burst into bloom and rejoice.

Water will do that. Create a whole new world order. A flood of water can change the way everything looks.

We can tap into our water instinct and make those changes. We can find ways to topple powers that seem as solid as granite. For nothing wears down the hardest stone better than water.

We can tap into our water power and create a flood of love and mercy and *justice* in order to break courts and congresses that want to paint a different landscape.

We can tap into our instinctive calling toward water and harness that energy for change.

It won't be easy. Water's work may be subtle at times, but it is relentless, continuous and requires stamina.

It won't be quick. As they like to say, the Grand Canyon wasn't made in a day. The carving knife of water wields slowly but steadily and our work will require patience and perseverance.

But thinking back to that great discovery lying under the surface at the Great Barrier Reef, let us not forgo the great gifts of our water spirit that lurk just beneath our surfaces.

Spirit of the Great Waters, alive in us, empowering us. Calling out to us to pay attention, to stand up, to hold hands and join forces. Knowing that together we hold within us the “power to dissolve boundaries, to release holdings,. . . to cleanse and to heal.”²

May it be so, this Advent, and may it be so in every advent of change and transformation in our lives.

Amen.

² *Ralph Metzner, Earth Prayers, HarperOne, San Francisco, page ???*