

Sermon– “Ebb and Flow”

Scripture Readings – Ephesians 3:14-21, John 6:1-21

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Our first scripture reading is Ephesians 3:14-21. With much affection, Paul prays for the Christians in Ephesus and asks God to strengthen their "inner being" – their sense of themselves as God's children, that they may be rooted and grounded in Christ's love – a love that, like the sea, is too wide and long and high and deep to be known or fully understood. Let us open our hearts and minds to the reading of God's Holy Word.

14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. 16 I pray that, according to the riches of God's glory, God may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through God's Spirit, 17 and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. 18 I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. 20 Now to God who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, 21 to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

In our second scripture reading, John 6:1-21, we find two miracle stories in the ebb and flow of life along the Sea of Galilee. On the shore, Jesus provides food to those who hunger after righteousness, and on the sea Jesus walks upon the stormy sea bringing his disciples and their boat to a safe crossing. Those who are in the presence of Christ are filled with wonder and fear. They are torn between making him their king, perhaps as a way to control what they do not understand, and being terrified. John weaves these stories together with strands from the Exodus story so that the reader cannot help but remember the Israelites feeding on the manna from heaven and their safe crossing of the Red Sea. Early Christians also understood the feeding of the five thousand as among the first Eucharist gatherings. When Jesus comes to the disciples on the water, his response “It is I” is more literally interpreted “I am,” the same words spoken by Yahweh when God was revealed to Moses in the burning bush. John wants to be clear about who Christ is! Listen for the Word of God.

1 After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. 2 A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. 3 Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. 4 Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. 5 When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" 6 He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. 7 Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." 8 One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, 9 "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" 10 Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. 11 Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. 12 When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." 13 So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. 14 When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the

prophet who is to come into the world." **15** When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself. **16** When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, **17** got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. **18** The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. **19** When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. **20** But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." **21** Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.

The title of the sermon – "Ebb and Flow"

The text: "... they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But Jesus said to them, 'It is I; do not be afraid.'" John 6:19b-20

Let us pray. Holy and Loving God, we are grateful for your ability to walk into our dark, stormy nights and rise above the chaos in the ebb and flow of our ever-changing lives. As we reflect together on your word, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable to you. Amen.

Anne Morrow Lindbergh, in her book *Gift from the Sea*, brings us to the water, to the shore and invites us to widen our understanding of the ebb and flow of life's tides, to strengthen our "inner being" and to deepen our sense of self. Each chapter begins with a description of a shell, which she will take home with her following her time on the ocean to remind her of an insight about life and relationships. I first came across Anne's book in Captiva, Florida during a Spring break and it is a book I return to regularly.

Anne wrote this book in 1955, while she was raising five children in Connecticut. She was married to Charles Lindbergh, who flew one of the first commercial airmail routes between Chicago and St. Louis through Springfield before becoming the first man to cross the Atlantic Ocean in an airplane. Anne was a woman familiar with seas and the abrupt changes of life's tides. She grew up in a family devoted to literature and public service and received a degree in English from Smith College. Anne met her husband in Mexico City, where he had flown at the invitation of her father, Dwight Morrow, who was then United States Ambassador to Mexico. After their marriage in 1929 Anne involved herself in Charles' flying career, accompanying him on his survey flights for future airlines. Following the tragic kidnapping and murder of their first child, the Lindbergh's moved to Europe for protection and privacy. World War II meant yet another change bringing them home to the United States where Anne lived at the time she wrote *Gift from the Sea*.

In the midst of a complicated and full life, Anne would retreat to the water each year where she found simplicity, solitude and time to reflect on her many varied and changing relationships. Reflecting on the shape of a shell, she writes:

What is the shape of my life? The shape of my life today starts with a family. I have also a craft, writing, and therefore work I want to pursue. I want to give and take from my children and husband, to share with friends and community, to carry out my obligations, as a woman, as an artist, as a citizen. ... But I want first of all—in fact, as an end to these other desires—to be at peace with myself. I want a singleness of eye, a purity of intention, a central core to my life that will enable me to carry out these obligations and activities as well as I can. I want, in fact—to borrow from the language of the saints—to live "in grace" as much of the time as possible. By grace I mean an inner harmony, essentially spiritual,

which can be translated to outward harmony... so that I may give as I was meant to give in the eyes of God.

Who among us does not long to *live in the grace* Anne describes... to be *strengthened in our inner being*, to be *rooted and grounded in the love* the Apostle Paul describes in his prayer for the Ephesians.

The sea offered Anne another insight. In the ebb and flow of the tides that shaped the shells she collected, Anne recognized that movement and change are a part of life and something to be accepted, even celebrated rather than feared. She writes:

We have so little faith in the ebb and flow of life, of love, of relationships. We leap at the flow of the tide and resist in terror its ebb. We are afraid it will never return. We insist on permanency, on duration, on continuity; when the only continuity possible, in life as in love, is in growth, in fluidity –in freedom... Perhaps this is the most important thing for me to take back from beach-living; simply the memory that each cycle of the tide is valid; each cycle of the wave is valid; each cycle of the relationship is valid. And my shells? They are only there to remind me that the sea recedes and returns eternally.

For Anne Morrow Lindbergh the sea offered a place to be nourished and renewed spiritually, a place to be reminded of the ever-changing mysteries of life and love; and the wonders of God's creation.

Three hundred years earlier across the Atlantic Ocean, the same ebb and flow of the tides offered Galileo another gift of insight. His publication *Theory on the Tides* was part of his scientific journey toward proving Copernicus' theory that the rotating Earth revolved around the Sun. This journey brought rage and storm into Galileo's life when the Roman Catholic Church convicted him of heresy, condemned him, forced him to recant his discoveries and confined him to house arrest. For the powers that be in Rome at that time, a world in constant motion challenged the theological doctrine of an unchanging, immovable God, and the Earth revolving around the Sun threatened the position of the Church as the center of the world and its ability to control. It wasn't until 1992, 350 years after Galileo's condemnation, that Pope John Paul II rectified one of Catholicism's most infamous wrongs and apologized.

How often do we resist the ebb and flow that are a part of the change within our lives? And isn't a large part of our fear the loss of control and certainty that are a part of change. The mystery and wonder of our faith is that the only constancy in the ever-changing world is the love of God, which like the sea, is wider and broader and deeper than we can comprehend.

The sea, with its gifts and mysteries, is not always a place of serenity. The sea can be a dangerous, frightening place, especially at night. The night the disciples saw Jesus walking on the water, they were alone in the dark. An unexpected storm was moving over the Sea of Galilee. Surely the disciples were uneasy, anxious, even frightened. However John makes it clear that what was more terrifying to them that night was the fact that they were in the presence of the divine. The disciples came face to face with the One whose mercy is wider than the sea he is walking on, and we learn that this, my friends, is a terrifying experience. Wonderful, certainly; life-changing, absolutely; but nonetheless, terrifying.

When Jesus identifies himself, saying *It is I*, the phrase he uses is the phrase Moses heard while standing on holy ground before the burning bush in Exodus: *I AM THAT I AM*. John, through Old Testament allusions and images identifies Jesus as the God of Moses who makes a path through the

sea and the God of Job who walks upon the water. Jesus shares in God's dominion over the waters of chaos in this ever-changing world.

And then because Jesus understood what his disciples must be feeling, he says: *Be not afraid*. The Iona Community in Scotland has set these words to a song which offers strength and courage in the ever-changing tides within our lives... a song that has become a mainstream in my life since I first heard it the summer of 2011. When we find ourselves in the storms of life, may Christ's words strengthen us:

*Don't be afraid, my love is stronger;
my love is stronger than your fear.
Don't be afraid, my love is stronger and
I have promised, promised to be always near.*

Let us not forget in the ebb and flow of the changing world and each of our lives, that Jesus has promised to be near... nourishing our bodies and spirits with daily bread in the Eucharist even as he fed the five thousand along the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

And when we find ourselves in the darkness and distress of the sea—overwhelmed by the chaos of change around us, may we remember that we have a God who walks upon the waters, who makes a path through the sea; whose love is stronger than our fear—and wider and deeper and broader than our minds can comprehend. Thanks be to God! Amen.