

“THE SEA AROUND US”

Job 39:1-18, Luke 5:1-11

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Some of you may remember a line from one of John Denver’s songs about “coming home to a place you’ve never been before.” That’s what going to the ocean is like for me – every time.



It’s not about vacationing or sunning on the beach or even being in a scenic spot – it’s the ocean itself... the smell of it, the vastness, and above all the sound of the waves. There is something so restorative about it, at once uplifting and calming.

I know I’m not alone in this feeling, because I’ve heard many people express a similar feeling about being by or swimming in the ocean. Some people say that the rhythm of the waves or the movement of the water connects with the memory deep within us of being in the womb. The ocean reminds us of where we came from. It is sort of like coming home. And most biologists will tell you that life on earth, did begin in the ocean... so in another sense it really is where we came from.



It is also the biggest part of our world. “Seen from space, Earth is blue – the blue of the one great ocean that covers most of the globe...”



“Earth is not a land planet, like Mars or Venus, but an ocean planet. The land that rises above the sea occupies less than 30 percent of Earth’s total area. ...

Mars and Venus differ from Earth in another essential way: they are dead worlds. Earth is the only planet in the solar system that supports life. And it is able to support life because of the ocean. For the ocean is our cradle, the regulator of our life-supporting atmosphere, and the key to continuing life on the planet.” (Thorne-Miller, p.27)

Here in the middle of a huge continent, we are perhaps not quite as aware of the oceans as part of our daily lives in the same way we’d be if we lived on a coast, or in an island nation, like Cuba or Iceland. But in Michigan we are sort of surrounded by the largest inland seas on the planet.



They give us a well-watered and fertile home here, and when we visit their shores, we feel that same awe, gratitude and restoration of spirit.

But whether we are paying close attention to it or not, the fact is that “everyone is linked to the ocean in one way or another. Rocky Mountain snowcaps, for example, are frozen ocean.



“Rains that soak Kansas corn are driven by the climate-regulating machinery of the ocean – which redistributes heat in its ... currents like an immense global circulatory system. It’s a universal dynamic in our lives.” (Jean-Michel Cousteau, p.23)

Little wonder, then, that “the ocean” is often a metaphor for the love of God surrounding us, sustaining and feeding us, healing and restoring us. God’s love flows all around us, sometimes unseen or unnoticed, but making our lives possible. God’s love is where we came from, and the home we return to. It is vast, beautiful, beyond our comprehension, different every day and yet always there... an ocean of grace.



But there's another dimension to this metaphor. When we look out over the sea, we feel very small next to its immensity. We feel its power. Its depths hold mysteries we can't see.



Under its surface are mountains and canyons and volcanoes, coral reefs...

It is home to creatures as diverse as humpback whales and lobsters and stingrays and starfish and plankton.





Even today, much of it hasn't been explored and studied – to do so involves special skill and equipment, expense and danger. We know that the waters of the ocean and of the great lakes also cover shipwrecks, and we've seen footage of hurricanes and tsunamis – there's danger in the sea, too. Human beings who ignore that fact do so at their peril. It's just so much bigger than us and all our abilities.



This is what God calls Job's attention to in the scripture we heard this morning. Job has grieved the suffering and the setbacks and the many losses he's endured, and asked "why?" His friends have, not very successfully, tried to give him reasons and advice. Finally God speaks to him, and what does God do? God reminds him of what we are reminded of when we stand on the shore: that we are not God.



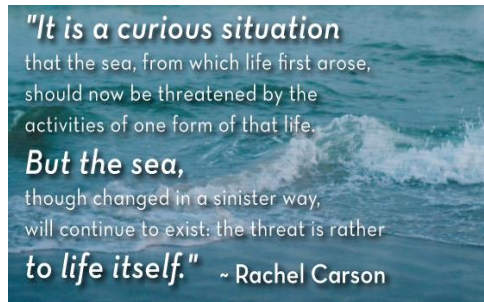
That the world around us – and especially the powerful, mysterious sea – is God's design. It's not ours. It doesn't bend itself to our desires. It's not in our control. Life itself is not in our control.

And yet ... it is wonderful, stunningly beautiful, mind-bogglingly complex, infinitely interesting. It is a gift. It is grace. It is God. God, who is also, like the ocean, a mystery to us in many ways, powerful, surprising, not to be trifled with or manipulated, this God who made us, who gave us life.

Job is recalled – we are recalled – to our humanity, loved and limited, surrounded by grace but also in peril, sometimes because of our own foolishness and pride.

Today when we stand at the edge of the sea our gratitude and awe and humility is also mixed with awareness that we, the human race, are trying very hard to kill the life-giving ocean around us.

The environmentalist Rachel Carson said, over fifty years ago,



"It is a curious situation that the sea, from which life first arose should now be threatened by the activities of one form of that life. But the sea, though changed in a sinister way, will continue to exist; the threat is rather to life itself." (Carson, *The Sea Around Us*)

We are all part of that threat to our planet and ourselves. Most of the pollution in the oceans starts on land.



But it ends up in the oceans: wastewater, fertilizer and pesticide runoff, oil spills, tons of plastics, illegally dumped chemicals.



It kills aquatic creatures and seabirds, destroys habitats (like the coral reefs), gets into the food chain. Overfishing disrupts ecosystems and threatens species with extinction; climate change

leads to warming and rising seas as the polar ice caps and glaciers melt. What all the consequences will be we don't know. But we can be sure there will be consequences.



Rachel Carson said, "... in the vast and mysterious reaches of the sea we are brought back to the fundamental truth that nothing lives to itself." (Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, introduction)

Did we once imagine that the vastness of the ocean meant that it could absorb our carelessness? Perhaps. But I think that turning away from awe and toward greed has much more to do with it. If we had really remembered, deep in our bones, that the seas are life to us, that they are God's love and grace to us, could we have been so wantonly destructive?



Most people agree that we are facing an ecological crisis, and that it's a moral crisis as well: we have done this; there are consequences; we have a moral duty to do whatever we can do to change our ways and repair the harm that has been done. But some also say – and I would agree – that this is all a sign of spiritual crisis as well. We "are destroying one of the deep mysteries God has given us to explore, one of the domains of God's presence." (seasonofcreation.com) We have turned away from awe, we have disregarded our interconnection with all of God's creation, we have forgotten the ocean of love and grace that upholds us.

As folks who love God and who love God's world, we need to support every effort to care for the earth and its oceans – if necessary changing our habits, relinquishing profits, paying more, using our voices, getting political.

But we also need to stand on the shore in humility and wonder.



We need to listen. We need to drop our nets, so to speak, into the deep, mysterious beauty of God's world and God's love, and be amazed at the surprises, the sustenance, the gifts that are there for us, the miracles that will change and redirect us.



Resources

seasonofcreation.com

Ocean, by Boyce Thorne-Miller, 1993, Collins Publishers, San Francisco

Essay by Jean-Michel Cousteau in *Ocean*, 1993, Collins Publishers, San Francisco

The Sea Around Us, Rachel Carson, 1951

Silent Spring, Rachel Carson, 1962