

SERMON

I want to tell you three stories of my experience with water:

I grew up on the shores of Lake Erie. Whilst it is the smallest of the great lakes, you still can't see the other side when standing on the shore. One of the last times I saw the lake was right after Bryce and my wedding. We went to Leamington (where I'm from) to spend 2 days with my dad. You see, he had had his first stroke a week before our wedding – but that's a different story all together. Anyway, on Wednesday after running a few errands, we found ourselves drawn to the lake. Bryce and I drove down to the dock - where the big Pelee Island Ferry docks - and watched the waves crash over the pier.

That day, the waves were 6 feet high plus, and we couldn't help but get royally wet. The smell of Lake Erie, the sound, the sight of the sunlight on the water and the waves crashing filled me with nostalgia and a little bit of fear. Some days are calm, and the water is still - other days it crashes so loudly you can't hear each other talk. Lake Erie has one of the largest populations of shipwrecks because of its shallow sandy depths and its dynamic unpredictable weather.

Water – its unpredictable and treacherous

Long before Covid and long before Bryce, I was a pastor in Saskatchewan. Mennonite Church Saskatchewan made a yearly retreat for pastors up north in Missinipe – on the shores of Otter Lake on the Churchhill river which eventually flowed into Hudson Bay. There, in the trees and rocks and the clear lake we canoed, picked wild blueberries, played games, and talked about Sabbath.

One afternoon we had a choice to either go on a pontoon tour of lake or go on a rigorous bush hike. A few noble and gangly pastors chose the bush hike - but most of us hopped on that pontoon. Eagles, egrets, hawks, loons, grebes and all sorts of other flora and fauna delighted us. We all, except captain Dan, the youngest of us all, got hopelessly lost in the islands. Near to the end of our adventures, Dan pulled up to an island with a smallish rock cliff. Here we tied up the boat, and some of us got out. Some wandered the island, some stayed on the boat and got out their cameras. And 4 of us scrambled up the cliff and jumped off.

Of course, Dan, and my friends Craig and Kirsten all jumped off that cliff - no qualms. I was, as is typical, somewhat anxious about jumping. But I did it too - and with my life-vest on. I jumped in but I was still a chicken because I didn't really trust the water.

As soon as I landed in the water - and felt the cool green waves wash over me I thought surely, I would sink to the bottom and drown.

Water – its refreshing and calm – but can pull you in

The last church I pastored was in the heart of grain country – a mixed-grass plain in the north eastern quadrant of the prairies. We were not far from the endlessly flat treeless plains to the south and not far from the rocky lakes and muskeg bogs of the Boreal Shield. The farmers here grow some wheat and barley but mostly peas and canola and flax.

After some hard dry years in the 80's, everybody – were they large scale farmers or back yard gardeners – everybody prayed for rain. Farmers lost their farms, whole families moved to the city – or to BC where there was always work and family already stationed there. A once bustling 400 member church dwindled down to just over 150...and one year there were no children.

You can imagine the joy the year they got 4 feet of snow (that lasted all winter). But this only began the trend for the next few years. When I was there, we had to install an exterior sump-pump because the basement floor of the parsonage was under the level of the water-table. Farmer's fields were flooded, my flowerbeds were flooded and, when people asked what I was growing in my garden, I said, "rice". We even stopped singing some of our favourite songs in Church – Rain Down, specifically was unofficially banned for several years.

I can remember when the farmers would meet for coffee at the Happy Shopper and I'd join them sometimes, the conversations would, inevitably meander towards the weather. One time, during these wet years, in February, Henry Bergen was asked, "what do you think will happen this year?" He said, "I hope it rains."

In the middle of the flood years, "I hope it rains."

Water. You can love it or hate it, you should fear it – but you always need it.

Every early creation story – including ours found in the Bible – tells of power over the chaotic waters of creation.

In the beginning when God created the heaven and the earth, the earth was in chaos and empty and darkness covered the surface of the sea, and the breath of God ruffled the surface of the waters.

In the beginning God's Spirit hovered over the deep, drawing out life from chaos, shattering darkness and death. God modeled the earth and shaped the waters and the sky – and called it good. Later in Genesis 2 we read how God caused a stream to burst from the ground and, as it left Eden – it divided into four rivers that made fertile the surrounding countryside.

Our God's hands mold and shape and direct this life-giving water to nourish the land and to give refreshment and re-creation to God's people.

Examples of God's recreating through water happen all over God's relationship story with us!

We see it in the story of the flood – where Noah and his family trusted the LORD and set sail in their crowded ark...sailing to unknown lands with the promise that the Lord would provide – all the while watching as their neighbors and all their animals drowned.

And yet, within the ark, God kept them safe and dry and, when they and all the animals emerged a little broken and a little more vulnerable than they had ever been before, God showed a sign, a rainbow; water reflecting on light. It served to remind them and God, that God would never again flood the world.

The waters below and even the waters above obeyed God's voice. Noah and his family and two of every kind of animal sailed from a life of death to new life. This the story of God re-creating the earth.

In Exodus 13 and 14, the enslaved Hebrew people found themselves hemmed in between a massive Egyptian army and the Red Sea. Here were a people with no natural means for survival. On one hand, they faced certain slaughter at the hands of the Egyptians, and on the other hand they would drown in the sea. And what happened? Just like at creation, a wind rushed over the waters and dry land appeared and the people crossed over.

The waters below and even the waters above obeyed God's voice. The Israelites passed from a life of slavery and death into a new life of covenant building. This is the story of the creation of the children of Israel.

Later when they entered the Promised Land, the Jordan River parted, and the wind of the spirit breathed dry land for the children of Israel to cross.

The waters below and even the waters above listened to God's voice and the Israelites crossed from death in the wilderness to new life in the promised land. This is the story of the re-creation of children of Israel.

In the Hebrew Bible there are many more stories about how God reworks creation to bring about something new – of God putting something to death so that new life can emerge.

Think about Jonah swallowed in the sea in order to be remade. Or Naaman – covered in leprosy - dipping himself in the Jordan on the word of a prophet and promise of a foreign God – only to be healed.

To the Hebrew people, then – a people from an arid desert place, water meant more than something to drink – it meant danger, death, and refreshing new life. God was always re-creating or even creating something new – and water was always central to God's creating.

In the Gospels we have even more creation or re-creation stories. The Gospel writer of the book of Mark had no interest in telling the story of Jesus' birth. Mark's story starts right in the middle of John the Baptist preaching. Jesus comes to John to be baptized and Jesus enters the waters.

Baptism was, for the people of God then – and for us today – a symbolic ritual of cleansing – of consciously putting the old ways to death and emerging as a new creation – quite literally to be figuratively born again.

Jesus is submerged; he dives into the deep; he dies to himself. As Jesus emerges, he is born again, re-created – molded and shaped by the creator. The Spirit, as a dove, hovers over the waters and the voice of God speaks - just as at creation.

It is worth noting the words God speaks in this creation account. God says, "This is my child, my beloved, in him I am well pleased." In other words, what I have made is good. The waters below and even the waters above listened to God's voice and Jesus begins his new life in ministry. This is the story of the creation of God's son.

And what comes of this creation? Jesus is not concerned with privileged but with the broken and with those who yearn to be healed. His priority is following the will of God.

Jesus called a group of motley fishermen and they jumped out of their boats into that water of re-creation.

And after he had denied Jesus 3 times – and Christ died, Peter leapt out of the boat and swam and waded to shore to meet new life and new creation in Christ frying fish on the shore.

And we could go on: Paul was blinded - plunged into darkness before he emerged into the light and new meaning for his life. Christ lay dead in the tomb and, on the 3rd day rose from the dead – a new creation.

And we read in Revelation how there will be a new heaven and earth and the sea will be no more. No More Death. “See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them as their God; they will be God’s people and GOD WILL BE WITH THEM.

God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”

The waters above and the waters below obey the voice of God and God’s people are made new. This is the story of the God of Life and Love claiming and recreating.

And what is your story? Are you ready to jump into that lake – to dive in? Are you ready to find out what it is that God is calling you to be?

Do you remember that day? That day when the water poured over you? And you made promises – to give and receive council, to be faithful to Christ with your life, when you publicly renounced the powers of the world for the ultimate citizenship in God’s kingdom now and not yet? That day you waded into the water?

That day was not the beginning nor the end of God’s creation in you...but it was/or is a symbol of your willingness to let go of the side of the pool; to shed the weighty clothes of wrath and selfishness and entitlement and jump into God’s promise.

And when we jump into that promise – when those waters of creation cover over our head – it is only then, when we're faced with immanent death to self, that we reach out. And who takes our hand? The Great Creator who molds and shapes us into a new creation.

My friends, do not be afraid to dive in. The LORD who hovered over the waters of creation makes all things new. The LORD who proclaimed Jesus "beloved" desires for our re-creation too. Take heart. The Lord is about to do something new – can you not perceive it?