

Into the Deep Lent 1,2021 Genesis 9:8-17; Mark 1:9-13

Standing on the edge of the pool, not the heated mineral springs, a regular pool, getting ready to jump in. Testing the temperature with your toes, shivering a little. Those in the pool say it's fine once you get in. But you don't believe them at all. It feels cold. There are those who simply jump right in, and there are those who hesitate quite a while, like me. We drag out the torment, slowly wading in and shivering at how cold it is. And then finally take the plunge...and after a few strokes discover that indeed it is fine once you get in.

Our theme for lent is deepening the relationship with God. And today we are looking at the flood and baptism. So today we are looking particularly at the metaphor of water. The sea was seen by the ancient Hebrews as a symbol both for chaos and death. At Creation the Spirit of God hovered over the face of the deep...the sea...and out of that chaos and death came light and life. But some chapters later the waters of the deep and the waters of the sky flood the earth and humanity is left floating on a lifeboat with all kinds of animals waiting for God's good pleasure to free them again upon the earth.

Here in Saskatchewan we don't see much of the ocean. We see the prairie grasses rippling in the breeze like an ocean but the thought of drowning does not much occur to us...or the unpleasantness of deep cold water and destroying floods...though from time to time we have a wet year and crops don't make it. The flood isn't a very relevant story for us...and yet it bears attention anyhow. Because the sea, floods, are deep water. It can be very scary. The first time we go into the deep end of the pool and our feet no longer touch we can panic. When we have visited the ocean and go in...the waters often seem to drag us out beyond our depth. The waves buffet our bodies and we only have as much control as we have strength.

So it is in our relationship with our God. How deep do we dare go? At what point can we risk losing control of that relationship and let God do God's will in us? What is it that ultimately frightens us away from a deep and intimate relationship with God or anyone else for that matter?

I think that it's a matter of trust. Can I trust God or another with my deepest darkest secrets and self? All of us present a certain external self to the world. We can be in the midst of an argument with a family member and answer the phone as if it were a pleasant day and time. We gather together pleasantly, even cheerfully for worship while we may be in deep despair in our hearts. Even in our most intimate relationships we may not be able to speak of our deep needs and desires because we are afraid that they will not be accepted by the other, they may even be ridiculed or separate us from another. We may be judged and condemned by those innermost thoughts. So, we may come to God with these same barriers in our hearts. We may come to God and try to hide our innermost selves...acting and praying like we do in church or in social gatherings and being quite politically correct.

We shudder when we read the psalmist's words: search me and know me and see if there be any wicked way in me....because we are afraid that God truly will find all that which is hidden. And of course God does. God does know us. God created us. It is possible that we have no idea how bad we really are. Our prayers are what may open our own eyes to see ourselves truly. And we may be shocked and chagrined by our failings. And I think that is why it is so difficult to go deep with God. At least one reason.

The other reason is that again of trust but the other direction. We are afraid, some of us, if we are honest that God isn't real, won't help, and doesn't care. We've had prayers answered negatively. We've had experiences that were terrible and it seemed that God was not there. And so to go deep we may find out that God isn't. And that terrifies us. Fear of the deep. Fear of intimacy. Fear keeps us from God and each other.

I like AAs Alcoholics Anonymous style of beginning each meeting with the admittance that they are alcoholics and sometimes how many days or hours it has been since they last had a drink. There's a brutal honesty there and acceptance by the group even if it has only been hours since they tried again. Hi, I'm Sarah, I'm an alcoholic...and the group replies: Hi Sarah...and after she tells her story they thank her and clap no matter what. She is paired with a sponsor and they meet as often as needed to keep the alcohol temptation at bay. Perhaps each Sunday we could start our service with something similar: Hi, I'm Rose and I'm a sinner....wouldn't that put people who think they are perfect or who reject the faith because they think we think we're perfect in a different perspective. It would certainly be more honest. And that honesty invites both trust and intimacy.

The flood brings to mind a dark and scary place where we are not in control. Though it may not be immediately clear so does baptism. When we are baptised we are baptised into the death of Christ. Our old self is washed away....we are no longer in control. Now, that doesn't mean that we are no longer responsible for our lives and choices. It means that our center is elsewhere. I noted in my journal this week that prayer time helps us be more centered, more objective about life, because our center is both within and outside of ourselves with the Lord. Jesus is in us and outside of us, so we can see the world with better perspective when we step outside of ourselves and our preoccupations. It helps us admit when we are wrong. It helps us change our minds because it is not about us at all...it is about truth and Jesus and love and forgiveness.

Noah's family and the remnants of animal life with them stand on the edge of a receding sea that had swallowed up the world. God's favor had spared them on the ark. But they were left with a deep sense of how helpless they were, how they depended on God's mercy. God pierces those emotional depths with a sign: a rainbow. It serves to remind them and God that never again will God flood the earth in that way. It is not a promise that anything they fear will never happen. But it is a sign that God has chosen them and will be with them forever.

But when the earth and waters settled down and Noah and his family and all the creatures that were on the boat with them came out onto dry ground, they made a sacrifice to God in thanks. And God made a promise: In Ch 8: 21-22 God says: "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.²² As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease."

God is totally aware that people are going to keep on sinning. But God is nevertheless promising good to all of humanity. God is promising that the ground is no longer cursed. Remember in Gen. 3 the ground was to bring forth weeds to make farming hard. Well, there are still weeds, but something has changed

here. God has set seasons in nature to flow naturally. God has set day and night for our benefit. All this even though God knows we're going to mess things up. God is really awesome!

So here I am reminding us of God's love and promises. What does that have to do with deepening our relationship with God? Going deep? I think we all need to ask ourselves both what are we afraid of and if we are willing to risk it for the sake of God and truth. If I question the existence of God will I fall into those everlasting arms? Or will I end up finding out that it's all a sham? I don't know what it might be for you. But I know that whenever I have risked those questions and doubts I have not always had my intellectual questions answered. I find that paradoxes exist. But I also find out that there is One who loves me and knows me...and indeed I can rest in those everlasting arms. I know and believe that God is and that God is both terrible and mysterious and full of love and compassion. Again, I don't know where your journey will take you. But I am confident that the one who calls us is faithful and sure and unthreatened by our questions and doubts. Of course if we are afraid of seeing ourselves for who we really are, then we should not try to deepen our relationship with God. Just stay on the surface.

But if we are willing to take the plunge then we can take to heart what God says in vs. 12-13 "This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come;" This is a big forever covenant. A big promise that God is making for all time. God says: "I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind."

The sign of the rainbow is a sign of peace, whether or not we deserve it. It is unconditional love and caring by our God. God calls us to this deep love. It calls us to trust God with all that lies deep within us.

Sometimes we think that the message of Grace comes only in the New Testament with Jesus. But the truth is that God's grace is evident all around us. It is evident in the world that God has given us. Sometimes we think of the world as wild and savage, but it is also beautiful and full of all that we could ever need. God has given us all the heart could desire, not because we deserve it, but because God loves us anyhow. Jesus is the greatest sign of God's grace and mercy, but before God came in the flesh God gave us many many other signs of love. As we enter this Lenten season let's begin by remembering God's deep love for the world, for creation. That we can trust God. When we are feeling vulnerable and frightened by what is happening in our lives or in our world we need to remember that our Lord doesn't want to punish us. God's not up there like some great avenging tyrant that cannot be pleased. Our Lord isn't up there constantly criticizing all we're doing. Nor is God up there indifferent to our sin, to our need. God loves us so much that God gave Jesus that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

In this world of change and challenge, pandemic, climate change, changes in the economy, in our international policies, in our national concerns it may seem scary. It may seem upsetting to our souls. We may be afraid to risk it with God, to allow God to see it all that is in us, even our doubts. Can we let go and dive in and trust that those everlasting arms will catch us and hold us safe and loved? Rest assured, God's hand is in all of this and God's will for us is for good, not for ill. God only wants what is

best for our growth, for our future, God sets this beautiful rainbow in the clouds...not in a clear sky, but in the clouds promising peace to all of God's creation. This is the God for whom it is okay to risk it all.