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Third Sunday in Lent
Psalm 91:9-12,14-16

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The Sea of Lent

There are times in the life of the church when things are so wonderfully full that we're tripping over ourselves; it's then that I sigh longingly to myself, "*I can't wait for Lent.*" Inevitably, however, when Lent comes, I feel a nagging sense of inadequacy and reluctance. Some of you may be wondering what observing Lent actually looks like. This approach/avoidance to Lent may come from our hesitancy to join the bandwagon and "give something up," our sense of not even knowing where to begin, or perhaps our lack of understanding about what Lent is in the first place. There seems to be an inherent tendency towards shame and blame woven into our view of the season, as if before we even begin, we have to recognize how broken we are. Which isn't entirely a bad idea, I have to admit.

This morning, however, three weeks into this Lenten journey, I'd like you to let that go; forget the self-denial, the self-recrimination, forget the idea that this is a season to deny yourself or beat yourself up. Let's try and reframe Lent from a trek into the desert where heat, hunger and Satan descend. Try not to think of the season as a confrontation with your errant ways of over indulgence, greed, selfishness and wanton disregard for others. Jesus spent 40 days in the desert and traditionally our observation of Lent seeks to reflect his experience.

At the start of every service here on Sunday mornings, Hadley and I welcome everyone to our fold, no matter where you are on your spiritual quests for God. The backdrop behind me emphasizes the movement and churning aspect of Lent, the idea that our coming to know God is always changing and evolving. So let's gather together on this swaefaring journey, this quest, these forty days of searching and wandering. I'd suggest this morning that we consider it a venture into the sea where we float and sometimes grip the rail.

I say "float" intentionally because I want to adopt an image from Herman Hesse's novel *Siddhartha* in which the image of water—in his case a river --is central to the

hero's journey. When Siddhartha himself approaches the river, the man who operates the ferry that carries travelers across the river says to him, "I have taken thousands of people across the river, and to all of them my river has been nothing but a hindrance on their journey. They have traveled for money and business, to weddings, on pilgrimages; the river had been in their way and the ferryman was there to take them quickly across the obstacle. However, among the thousands there have been a few, four or five, to whom the river was not an obstacle. They had heard its voice and listened to it, and the river has become holy to them, as it has to me."

Lent is the river or the sea we have collectively arrived at on our journey through the church year. No matter where we have come from or where we are going, we find ourselves at this body of water. It's an obstacle, an obstruction in the path of our pilgrimage. Can we go around it? Is there a bridge or ferry that would allow us to cross over? Can we just somehow forget Lent and start thinking about Easter as the supermarkets would have us do with hot cross buns and egg dyeing kits already on display? Having weathered this year's old-fashioned winter-of-no-relent, we're more than ready for spring. Snow, cold and ice have slowed us down and tripped us up for months and we're ripe for traction and momentum. Yet, here we are at the sea of Lent, a sea that can seem foreboding and dangerous.

Who needs this sea, this storm? Can't we turn around and go back to Advent and Christmas and Epiphany? In some ways, our church's life here at CCC is churning. What I'd like you to imagine this morning and in the weeks ahead is that God is the sea. And what you are invited to do is to slip into the water and allow yourselves to be carried, allow yourselves to be held and supported and embraced by the water, even though it might seem scary at times.

This requires is that you trust the water, trust that you'll be supported and cradled on your journey. Depending on our age, our bodies are between 78 and 60% water, so being afloat should not be alien for us. Perhaps the God that is the water dwells also through our bodies and souls. Central to our ability to trust the sea is our understanding of God.

I am reminded of something Meister Eckhart said, "God has no why." This is a simple statement that especially in Lent can be profoundly liberating. What this suggest to me is that God is not interested in our excuses, justifications or our explanations for

why we did this or that. As we travel, sail, float through Lent, God may not actually want us to crawl with heads bowed in shame or as Mary Oliver so beautifully said,

You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves. (Wild Geese)

A God without a why bids us welcome, not because of how good we've been, how repentant we are, or full of shame and apology. A God of no why loves you for who you are this moment. Reflecting on Eckhart's statement, the poet John O'Donohue says,

“A God without a why is a God who is lyrical and full of grace, a God who has no other intention than simply ‘to be.’ To learn that art of being is to become free of the burden of strategy, purpose and self-consciousness. God dwells totally in fluency of presence.

A large amount of human seriousness constructs itself around the question *why?* Answering this question often brings us into the labyrinth of psychological motivation, judgment, adulation and blame. A God without a ‘why’ sounds delightfully light and light hearted, a God of humour without all the mental armour of deliberateness, caginess or expectation.” (229)

Dare you slip into the sea of Lent and allow this God of loving embrace to hold and support you on your journey to Easter? Can you let go your grip of the rail, whatever that might look like? There will be things and behaviors you can try to leave behind and there will be others you simply have to take with you. The God of no why wants you just as you are. These encumbrances are varied. It may be a belief that your worth is largely measured by your accomplishments, your focus, your work, your ability to produce and procure the goods of the world. It may be the nagging shame you feel for having deceived someone, for having been less than honest at work or at home, or even with yourself. It may be a view of yourself that continually whispers that you just aren't enough—aren't smart enough, generous enough, attractive enough, nice enough, strong enough, rich enough. It might be a consuming grief that has

enveloped you in a leaden blanket that threatens to suffocate you. It might be a behavior over which you apparently have no control. It may be unrelenting physical pain from which you cannot escape. Or a heart broken in two. The God of no why honestly doesn't care what you leave behind or what you lug with you but just wants to support you on your Lenten journey in the water.

Rather than viewing Lent as a time to find God, why not see it as a time to let God find you? Be a receiver, be vulnerable to God's grace. As O'Donohue says, "Grace is the permanent climate of divine kindness... (that) nurtures the sore landscape of the human heart. . . Grace is the perennial infusion of springtime into the winter of bleakness." (228)

Holding this image of the roiling sea seems appropriate right now as the Middle East is embroiled in an acute war for which we bear a large measure of responsibility. Whether it's our new war with Iran or turmoil in your own life, you may have a queasy sense of imbalance, fear and anxiety. Being called to trust God in the midst of this storm, seems risky. And, let's face it, our landscape is frozen and slipping into the sea--the lake--would be dangerous. Where might you feel safe enough to open yourself to God? Where is that place where you might dare for a brief time to let go?

For me it is invariably outside, pretty much regardless of the weather. And it's in the early mornings that I find I am most open to God's infusion in this world and my being. I walk shortly before the sun comes up with Mercy, my dog.

I'm grateful towards that in the end of February the sun comes up earlier. This morning, however, with daylight savings, I was forced again to stand nose pressed to the window and wait for the brightening of the eastern sky. This time of year, when the skunks awaken from their winter slumber, it's a good idea not to go out in the predawn darkness when they're roaming about.

Several years ago--the last time I think Lake Champlain froze over--I had an experience on a morning like this that is still vivid in my mind. I'd like to share it with you as it seems appropriate to the questions raised this morning.

One late winter morning my previous dog Tess and I were walking by the frozen lake and happened to see three deer venture onto the ice. Two of them picked their way carefully while the third trotted briskly out only to do a classic "Bambi" and land split

limbed on the glassy surface. It lay absolutely still and I wondered if it had hit its head. Conscious also of a coyote den not far off, my concern rose. Should I call Charlie? The game warden? Take out my phone and start a video? What would I do if its leg were broken? But I held Tess—who incidentally was quivering with delight—resisted the urge to do something and just waited. Seeing us, the other two deer dashed off the lake into the woods, leaving the downed deer alone. I thought: that’s how it is sometimes. We head out into the water and find ourselves alone and maybe stunned and abandoned. Remembering this, I hear the psalmist say, “God will command the angels concerning you to watch over you.”

That morning I identified with the deer and was also aware of my impulse to fix the situation, to make something sad or bad, better. Ministers tend to be so inclined; it’s an occupational hazard. But it was Lent and I told myself to wait, to be, not to rush. In about three minutes—I can’t be sure of the time, it seemed forever—the doe lifted her head, jerked her neck a few times and got up. She walked with a swagger and was clearly confused because she came straight towards us. Tess couldn’t believe her good fortune, while I was stunned and held my breath. The doe stopped about fifteen feet from us, lowered her head and very slowly moved it from side to side, her furry nose gently brushing the dusting of snow on the ice. It seemed to me some mystical, holy, primordial greeting, some recognition of our shared experience, some homage of thanks for what didn’t happen and for our having waited for the hurt to pass. I wanted to reach out, to say thank you, I wanted to touch her soft face and look into her beautiful doe eyes. Instead, I breathed and felt *my cheeks wet with tears*. She turned and walked gingerly off the ice, bounded into the woods and I felt for all the world that I’d been visited by an angel.

This Lent venture into the sea, the wilderness, wherever you may find it; surrender and trust that God will command the angels to watch over you and teach you exactly what you need to learn. May you float in the divine kindness and let God find and love you.

Grace and Peace.

