

New Life, New Love

Acts 11:1-18
Revelation 21:1-6
John 13:31-35
Psalm 148

Do we have any ocean lovers here today? I adore the sea. I just came back from camping at Virginia Beach, and I can't tell yet if spending so much time on the seashore helped satisfy my craving for the ocean or if it just made it worse?! I'm infinitely captivated by the surf, have never managed to tire of walking along beach or looking out at the vast expanse of water stretching to the skyline.

Which is why I was so distressed the first time I ever heard this passage from Revelation. In this beautiful vision of a perfect, tearless, newly formed heavenly city, we hear that there is no longer any sea! Am I the only one who finds that upsetting? I don't know if this message will help make our ocean-loving friends feel any better, but there is a chance this sea less future is good news after all.

In the ancient world, the Ocean was known as a tremendous threat. The roiling waters became the definition of chaos, of unstable, untamable, unrelenting fury. In our creation story, the primordial waters of uncreated existence were dark, without order, formless, and inhospitable to life. We see God rend the waters in half to begin the work of creating. Both the Babylonian Myth of the Enuma Elish and The Canaanite story of Baal Vs Yam tell of the fury and aggression of the sea in opposing the goodness of newly created existence. In all these stories, the water had to be defeated. And it isn't just the waters themselves that are threatening. The sea was so feared that sea monsters developed to evoke the ongoing, unexpected, power of chaos that lurked under the waters. Leviathan was the Hebrew name for this fearsome enemy.

When we read about the recreated world having no sea, the early readers of this text would have felt relief. This hope would prove that the God of creation, who initiated this

world through defeating the power of the deep, will one day finally end the lurking threat of the sea and its monsters forever. When our Psalm instructs the whole earth to praise God, including the sea monsters and all deeps, we can understand that God is powerful enough to subdue even our greatest terrors into the submission of praising God's surpassing power. While God began the triumph over death through creation. Jesus conquered death through resurrection. And one day, death will be defeated forever when the Lord makes all things new. That is our hope, that is our praise, to see the full and final victory of God.

Understanding the way that water was feared in the ancient world because of its association with violence and death helps us uncover a deeper recognition of our baptismal identity in Christ. The Prayer Book specifies that full immersion, rather than water lifted from a font, is the preferred manner for Baptism. It's inconvenient so most churches don't practice dunking folks fully underwater. But that image of going under the water, submerging beneath the chaotic and unrelenting waters of death, to go through that violence in solidarity with Christ, to yield oneself so completely, is to identify oneself with the mercy of God who then raises us to NEW life. Most people probably don't want their priest thrusting their infants underwater to illustrate a theological point, but the imagery would be more accurate. It is in the waters of baptism that we die with Christ, and it is through those same waters that we are raised triumphant into NEW and unending life.

In John's Revelation, he tells us the Lord will give all who are thirsty from the spring of the water of life. Jesus is the Living Water. He is the source of what is lifegiving. Through his resurrection, the illustration of the power of his love, he subdued and purified the waters that once led only to death. The thing about Christianity that is so amazing is that our God does not just discard old things. We serve a God who makes all things NEW. Our God brings dead things to life, takes what was meant for harm and uses it for good, makes friends of enemies, and transforms the chaotic primordial waters of death into springs of living water to sustain us forever. One of the most startling things about our God, the one whose power has the ability to conquer our greatest threat, is that he didn't condescend

to death's tactics. He didn't use violence to subdue violence. He used the humility of love. It was the force of love, the willingness to die and pass through the waters, that brought us our salvation.

Peter struggles to understand this, to believe this. He had spent his life upholding the dietary restrictions of kosher eating. Have any of you ever been on a special diet? You know what it's like for humans who typically eat three times each day to maintain a restrictive diet. Multiple times every single day you have to make the effort to select specific foods while rejecting others. It is a lot of work and it's something that must be thought about multiple times every day. When Peter had a vision and the Lord told him to let go of that priority, it was mind-blowing. It wasn't just about what he was willing to eat either. It was a much bigger ask. Jesus was telling him that the ancient dividing lines between Jew and Gentile, between clean and unclean human beings, the distinctions that had been upheld by God's own Law since the Jews had escaped slavery in Egypt were to be laid aside. Jesus' work was to heal division, to unify the brokenness of the world by healing the fractures between people. And he was starting it with their stomachs. For Peter, and his community, the transcendent power of love would be reinforced every single time they put a bite of food in their mouths.

Did you notice, in our reading from John, **when** Jesus instituted his New Commandment, this imperative to love one another? He did it immediately after handing Judas the Eucharistic bread. Jesus told the disciples to take and eat the bread, to feed on his flesh that was about to be broken for them. He hands that bread, the illustration of his own bodily willingness to pass through the violent primordial waters of death, to the one who was betraying him. He gave Judas the eucharist and as Judas leaves the room, he chose that moment to instruct his disciples to LOVE. Loving this way requires the ultimate death to self. To follow Jesus in this way means laying aside our fiercest divides, plunging those fractures to death under the baptismal waters, and choosing to allow ourselves to be raised to new life beyond those hatreds and divisions.

Our collect says that to know the Lord **is** everlasting life. Jesus defines for us what real life looks like. He would experience glorification through the love that led to his death. It was on the other side of that love and that death that his risen life would prove the life that is stronger than death, the love that is stronger than death. According to both our Psalm and John's Revelation, eternal life is life lived with God. That life walks with Jesus through death into new life where death is conquered forever. Eternal life, according to Peter, was repentance from division. The disciples in Joppa experienced life through the Holy Spirit when they trusted God to heal the dividing lines between them. It is the New Commandment, the love of Jesus which heals our fractures and holds our lives together.

For Christians, real life is always found on the other side of death. If we want to follow Christ into eternal life, we must be willing to trust God's power is great enough to conquer our biggest threats, to lay aside our grudges and divisions, and love our fiercest enemies. God will make all things new. God will slay Leviathan. When we lean into our confidence in God as our Alpha and Omega, we can lay down our desire to fight because we know the Lord will one day make all of this new.

And if you love the ocean, like I do, together we can take heart knowing when we see this newly created world, there will be a shoreline to walk, but the waters therein won't be the chaotic and terrifying primordial deep of these ancient writers. Rather, God will have defeated that violence through the power of love, and the water we will experience will be from the everlasting springs of the water of life.

Until that day, may we be a people who trust the power of God's love enough to follow Jesus through the waters and in to life.