

“After the Plunge”

*A sermon preached by Rev. Daniel Smith
At First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC
Sunday, January 8th, 2006*

**The Lessons: Genesis 1: 1-5
Psalm 29
Mark 1: 1-11**

I was in New York City last week visiting friends when I happened to catch a feature on the local news about the Coney Island chapter of the Polar Bear Club. I was reminded of their longstanding New Years Day tradition where members gather on the beach, strip down to their suits or even their bvd's, and take a full plunge into water so cold that one person describes it as “liquid ice.” Imagine the shock to your system! The cold water would literally arrest your breath and you'd be gasping for air! I want you to hold that thought for a moment!

All three of our scriptures for today make mention of water and to understand them fully requires our making something of a plunge ourselves. On the one hand, Genesis immerses us in the primordial waters of chaos that existed before time, before the first day, before creation even. The psalmist calls them “the mighty waters” over which God reigns supreme. On the other hand, the writer of Mark dips us into the waters of the river Jordan where Jesus himself was baptized by John. In each of these cases, God's spirit is said to hover and move and breathe over water. Water, like wind and clay and flames, is one of those elemental images that is ripe for theological metaphor and spiritual meditation. Throughout the Bible, water cleanses and quenches and engulfs. In the case of our scriptures for today, water is the location of God's creative and transforming activity in our world. Water is the stage for not only the beginning of time itself; in the gospel lesson, it is the stage for the beginning of Jesus' ministry. By Mark's account, it's just three sentences and some 40 days in the desert later that Jesus is in Galilee, standing at the waters edge, shouting to Simon and Andrew, “Come and follow me!”

Taken together, these texts invite us to mystically imagine a watery kind of place in our lives – some pool or stream beneath the surface of our daily lives where we can take a plunge of our own, a place where we can remember and renew our baptisms, where we can wash away those parts of us that have become aimless and dull, and from where a new sense of order and purpose for our lives can emerge. Here is where we can strip down to our truest and most naked selves. Think about it. Where else can you so easily lose yourself, but in the water – be it in a morning swim, or a hot tub or a shower. I know for a fact that some of you do your best praying in the shower! Not because I've been there of course but because you've told me! Do you remember the ad for that pre-Body Shop bubble bath? “Calgon, Take me Away?” I remember pictures of a working mother, crazed by the demands of her day, throwing her arms in the air and crying out for that Calgon bath. She and we do need a break from the fast pace, from the hectic chaos and endless time based tasks of our lives – meetings, drop-offs, appointments, pick-ups, and start-times. I think our true desire though is not so much for a break from all chaotic busyness. What we really crave is to be taken away from all the order and the structure, to return to that seemingly primordial time when our lives were somehow formless and void, to go back to a time before anybody knew your address, or your cell phone number, or even your name! Imagine yourself, if only for a moment, freed from your schedules, from all the routines that give your life order and

sanity. Some of you will surely be more comfortable letting go of these things than others but I think our scriptures invite us to do just this, to leave all that orderly junk on the shore and to go for a swim where you can just be, completely detached from all that you must do all that you must have. When we give up the need to control and to order our lives just so, when we can get ourselves to some of God's holy and living water, we may just hear the voice of God trying to break in through the heavens.

Can you remember the waters of your own baptism dripping on your head, those of you that have been baptized that is? Assuming that many of you were baptized as a child, try to go there for a moment. Can you remember what your life was like before you had a house or an apartment of your own, before you had a job, before you had families of your own? Go ahead.... just momentarily free your mind of all of these things. In fact, see if you can go one step further and imagine what your life was like before you had a name and even before you had a body. If you are drawing a blank, you are right on track. The idea here is to shed your schedules, your titles, your roles and responsibilities, your concerns about the state of politics the world, all those things that you do and have that you think makes you who you are. Now try to picture in your minds some body of water into which your very being just melts, like slowly stepping into a warm pool and feeling the water line move its way up your body. Your feet would lift off the ground. You are free and you are floating in the very essence of creativity and of new beginning, in the stuff that according to scripture brand new worlds and brand new lives are made of. Imagine your bodies dissolving into this water. The poet Mary Oliver captures the feeling when she writes:

Stroke by
stroke my
body remembers that life and cries for
the lost parts of itself . . .

Fins, gills
opening like flowers into
the flesh – my legs
want to lock and become
one muscle, I swear I know
Just what the blue gray scales...
would feel like!
Paradise! . . .

To simply
become again a flaming body
of blind feeling
sleeking along
In the luminous roughage of the sea's body
vanished like victory inside that
Insucking genesis, that
roaring flamboyance, that
perfect beginning and conclusion of our own.

Are you there? Were you able to make the plunge? In these amniotic depths of our souls, in the water wells of our hearts, we are free to move pieces of our lives around, to make changes,

to feel the potential and possibility of real transformation, whether a little or a lot. Here we can know better who we are, beneath the surface, and whose we are.

Now that you've immersed yourselves in these waters, do you remember what God said to Jesus as he was coming up out of the Jordan? The choice of words is one of the most beautiful and eloquent I know. God said to him and God says to us, whenever we are stripped to our barest and most vulnerable self, whenever we are feeling most like a child, whenever we can't even remember our names, God tells us all that we need to know. God utters to us these words: "You are my beloved." (Pause) Can you imagine a world created on the foundations of these words? Taken together, these words of God, I believe, should be the very first ordering principle of our lives. If we could only wake up each morning and repeat them as if God were saying them directly to us. How strong would we feel? How ready to create ourselves and our world in the image of God? These waters, these words, cleanse us, quench us and engulf us in the love God. These simple words will give us all the bearings that we need to establish an order in our lives and in our world that will be most "precious in God's sight." They certainly started Jesus off on the right foot. When he headed into the desert for 40 days right after this scene in the Jordan, with his hair still wet, he knew all he needed to know to radically change the world.

The process of creation and creativity, for God and for us, begins amidst a watery chaos, an in-sucking genesis, a roaring flamboyance. In our hyper-ordered lives so bent around the demands of time and money, immerse yourselves in a little chaos and spontaneity! Throw caution to the wind! Overturn the routine of your life! Give thanks that you left your calendar at the office! Add some flux and flow to your lives! Tap your potential! To do these things will renew and replenish your soul in the most serendipitous and beautiful of ways. When the polar bears plunge into that liquid ice on the first of every year, they don't do it to be macho or to prove something, they do it because it shocks their systems and reorder their senses, leaving them exhilarated and alive anew. In the wake of Katrina and a Tsunami, of recent floods and water events of biblical proportions, some would say our systems have been shocked and our senses have been reordered already. But where are we emerging from these waters? Where will we again encounter and follow the God that calls us each beloved, regardless of where we live, how much money we make, and regardless of the color of our skin? And for those of who live here amidst a landscape that seems unchanged by such mighty waters, how can we wake up and feel that shock to our system every day?

The theologian Frederick Beuchner has written: "If you think you are seeing the same show all over again seven times a week, you are crazy! Every morning you wake up to something that in all eternity never was before and never will be again. And the you that wakes up was never before and will never be the same again either." When you wake up, tomorrow, dive off the starting blocks into a pool of new beginning, into God's creation and into God's creativity. Take the plunge into God's holy waters of living and life and feel the possibilities for your life. Remember who you are and whose you are and rising up out of the water, drink up the words - "You are my beloved. With you I am well pleased." Believe these words. As with Jesus, they have the power to create in you a new life, to sustain you through days and nights in the desert, to guide you as you share God's wisdom and love with our world. Amen.