

St. Paul's Episcopal Church
Sermon by Freya Gilbert
Sunday, February 18, 2024
Year B, Lent 1

I saw an advertisement the other day. It was for a bracelet. A bracelet for thalassophiles, lovers of the sea, lovers of the water. The first line the advertisement said, simply, Water-Powerful enough to drown you.

And I thought of today's texts. Noah and the flood, Jesus and his baptism. And I felt afraid of drowning.

This morning, we entered the story world of Noah near its end, after the flood which drowned Noah's world. But we know the beginning of this story world. Noah's world was already drowning, even before the first rain drop fell. Noah was already drowning. Drowning in a world of violence and unbridled greed, a world drowning in every impulse, every urge, that deprived Noah of his humanity and left him drowning in fear.

In the words of Genesis, the wickedness of man was great in the earth and every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was evil. Continually.

Noah was already drowning, his world was already drowning.

And in the story world of Jesus? We enter his story world this morning as he submits to ritual drowning. And like Noah...

Jesus was drowning, and the world he lived in was drowning.

Jesus lived on occupied land, in conquered territory. His life, the lives of his people were meaningless to the occupier, the conqueror. His life, the life of his people only had value to the degree in which it could be of use to the occupier, the conqueror, the enslaver. Jesus was, his people were, already drowning in a sea of violence and unbridled greed and fear.

And perhaps. Jesus' status as a carpenter drowned him. It's possible that his vocation, his trade put him near the bottom of the heap, subject to contempt and insult. Jesus, already drowning in shame.

It's also possible that Jesus was seen as an illegitimate child, perhaps even the product of an unwanted encounter between a Roman soldier and his mother. Jesus, already drowning in shame.

This world we live in? It's drowning in violence, in unbridled greed. We're drowning in violence and in unbridled greed. Our news is full of it, our history is full of it. The worst part is that our drowning leads us to drown others, as if pushing other people down was the only way for us to keep our heads above water. Our news is full of it, our history is full of it.

And our world is drowning in shame and fear. Perhaps you are drowning in shame and fear.

I think of a beloved friend. As a young girl, she was told over and over again: You're just like your mother, You're going to be just like your mother. Her mother was a heroin addict. Her mother gave everything away to feed her addiction. Her mother gave herself away. Her mother lost everything. And my beloved friend was told over and over again, you're just like your mother. Drowning in shame.

Omitted in homily for possible triggering effect: TW)

(I think of another beloved friend. Of one incident that stands in for an entire childhood. Her five year old self had playfully, innocently thrown snow in her younger sister's face. Her father proceeded to punish her mercilessly and violently, all the while screaming at her that she was a piece of

Drowning in violence, drowning in shame and fear.)

I think of myself even. From the moment I was born until six years ago when I began to transition, I was misnamed and misidentified. Told that I wasn't who I was, told that I was somebody else. Not even fully understanding the expectations made of me and why I could never live up to them. Drowning in shame. And even now, sometimes, drowning in fear of violence, violence against me, violence against the threat that somehow I must present just by existing as myself. Drowning.

But that shame I felt, and the fear I sometimes still feel, does not define me. It does not define my beloved friend, either.

Neither does our primordial fear of drowning define our relationship with the sea, with water. As my advertisement goes on to say, water is soft enough to cleanse, strong enough to save. Soft enough to cleanse, strong enough to save. We soak in water, bathe in water, float on water, sail over water.

In the story world of Noah, water had cleansed the earth of violence and unbridled greed. Our epistle tells us that Noah was saved through water. Noah emerges from the ark to begin again. To fail again, but always to try again, begin again, fail again, fail forward again, but always to begin again.

In the story world of Jesus, water cleanses him of shame and fear, saves him from shame and fear.

But let us enter one more story world of water, the story world of Genesis itself, of Creation. In this story world, the wind or spirit of God blowing over the water gives life. Water is itself the matrix of creation, the womb from which we emerge and our world.

Noah and his ark had floated on, sailed through, and emerged from the water womb that rebirthed and re-created Noah's world.

Jesus, too, emerges from the river, from the symbolic womb, reborn and re-created. And what happens to Noah, as he and his world are born again, as he and his world emerges from the womb? A rainbow happens. The rainbow itself is created from a dance of water and light. The rainbow is symbol of God's love. The rainbow is the beginning of a new, universal and unconditional covenant of God with the world. God chooses the world again, and God loves the world.

I imagine that when Jesus emerged from the womb of the river and the skies opened, that there was a rainbow as well. I'd like to think it was something we could have seen. But in Jesus' story, we hear the rainbow. We hear God's voice telling Jesus that he is the beloved Child, the one God loves, the one God chooses, the one in whom God is pleased and utterly delighted.

Get ready now, get ready. The rainbow was a symbol of God's love, of God's unconditional covenant with all God's creation.

But the voice of God we hear this morning, the voice of God Jesus heard?

That voice IS God's unconditional covenant with us. God's telling us that God loves us and chooses us. That you and I are God's children, that we are the beloved in whom God is pleased and utterly delighted.

Were you ready for that? Are you ready for that? Can you hear that voice?

If you weren't ready, if you aren't ready, ready to hear that voice of love and of choice, of unconditional covenant? Well, that's alright. That's what Lent is for.

In the story world of Jesus this morning, Jesus himself must go into the emptiness of the wilderness to fully understand and embrace his belovedness, his having been chosen. For forty days.

It's okay if it takes us the full forty days too. It's okay if it takes longer even. It's going to take my whole life long for me to listen to that voice.

But start to listen today, start to listen this Lent. Empty yourselves of everything that keeps you from hearing that voice that tells you that you are beloved, that you are chosen, that you are the one in whom God is pleased and ever so delighted.

But fill yourself too this Lent with everything that will let you hear that voice.

Hear that voice in the rainbow, hear that voice in our beautiful blue waters, in the coming of spring. Hear that voice in the Bread and the Cup. God loves you, you are God's child in whom God is well pleased, utterly delighted. Hear that voice in prayer and in study. Bathe in that voice, soak in that voice, luxuriate in that voice. Swim in the grace of that voice like fish in the water.

That is what Lent is for. Lent is our entering into the story world of Jesus. Lent is the entrance of Jesus' story world into our own.

A story world of rebirth and re-creation, a story world of cleansing and salvation, a story world of being loved and being chosen.

A story world which does not end in the wilderness, does not end in emptiness of the forty days. A story world which hears and replies to God's voice of love and

of unending, unconditional covenant.

My favorite Lenten hymn's first verse is this:
Now quit your care and anxious fear and worry
For schemes are vain and fretting brings no gain
Lent calls to prayer, to trust and dedication:
God brings new beauty nigh;
Reply, reply, reply with love to love most high
Reply with love to love most high.

Jesus fills himself with that voice during his Lent. And he replies. He replies by becoming that voice, that rainbow voice. He goes into his story world, being that voice, amplifying that voice to his drowning world. The time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of God is near.

In my story world, I hear that voice, I reply to that voice in the most brave, beautiful, bold and brilliant young woman ever. Two years ago, she chose me and loved me into becoming the mother of her heart and I reply by choosing her and loving her into becoming the daughter of my heart, in whom I am so well pleased, in whom I am so utterly delighted. Especially when she is drowning in shame and fear, I tell her over and over again that I love her and I choose her. And in her telling me "I love you, momma" she chooses me, over and over again.

This Lent, reply to the rainbow, reply to the voice of God, by being that rainbow, by becoming that voice, being that voice, amplifying that voice. Choose and be chosen, over and over again. Love, and be loved, over and over again. Choose the people around you, love the people around you, especially the ones who are drowning in shame and fear. Become the voice of God to them. Tell them, tell your story world: God chooses you
God loves you
God is well pleased in you
God is so so so utterly delighted in you, utterly delighted by you
Unconditionally.
Unendingly.
Chosen.
Loved.
Delighted in.