

SERMON: Saved Through Water  
TEXT: 1 Peter 3:13-22

5-17-20

As I write this sermon I am sitting in the library on the second floor of First Presbyterian Church in Cape Girardeau, Missouri. This is not my office, but the place where I retreat to write. From where I sit I can look out the window to see the Mississippi River sparkling in the sunshine. The view is inspiring. I love the idea that I could walk down the street and touch the water that only days ago (or weeks ago?) was flowing through St. Paul, Minnesota - the place of my childhood, where my siblings and their families and many old friends still live. The mighty river is a tangible reminder and strengthens the feeling of connection with special people and a special place.

Early this year I purchased a beautiful book entitled, *Roadtrip with a Raindrop: 90 Days Along the Mississippi River*. Gayle Harper is a travel writer and photographer who began planning her roadtrip after learning that a raindrop that falls into the headwaters of the Mississippi River in Minnesota will reach the Gulf of Mexico 90 days later. Harper describes the river as “one of America's greatest treasures. It is embedded in our history, our present, and our identity as a nation. Along its roughly 2,400 mile journey, it is transformed from a tiny creek into an

immense force of nature. It passes through dramatic changes in geography, climate, culture, lifestyles and accents.”

Most people are attracted to water, whether in the form of babbling brooks or raging rivers, placid ponds or Great Lakes, still streams or infinite oceans. Even muddy puddles are attractive to toddlers who delight in stomping and splashing until they are drenched from head to toe.

I think we all can relate to how good it feels to take a shower or bath after having been sick and unable to bathe for a few days. We feel more human and more alive. And I swear that even my car seems to run better after I've had it washed!

All people - all living creatures, in fact - are connected by our need for water. No one can live without it. Perhaps that's why we're so attracted to it.

I'll say more about water in a moment. But now, let's look at the scripture.

The First Letter of Peter was written to early Christians - a people who were facing - or would soon be facing - persecution. According to one commentary, "it was the author's aim to exhort believers to stand firm in their faith in the face of their present sufferings." (Miguel A. De La Torre, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 1)

We don't always realize how difficult it is to stand firm in our faith until we are in the midst of suffering. For some, the suffering will cause us to lose our faith or to deem it ineffective and without purpose. For others, the suffering serves to strengthen our faith. Or, you may be someone whose faith waxes and wanes from day to day or moment to moment.

I certainly don't have to remind you that we are in a time of suffering right now. Nor do I have to tell you that it is especially difficult to stand firm in your faith when you can't worship in the sanctuary of your church. When you can't lift your voices with others in a chorus of praise and prayer. When you don't have the opportunity to experience the Holy Spirit, present and moving within and among the gathered community. It is especially challenging - not to mention discouraging - to practice our faith when we can't fellowship and serve and study with other Christians as we are accustomed to.

Furthermore, we may well suffer for doing what is right, as the scripture suggests. “But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated.” More and more, people are being ridiculed for wearing masks, or accused of having a weak faith because we choose to remain sheltered or keep the church closed rather than risk further spreading of a deadly virus. These are not acts of fear, but of love and of hope. Our hope is in Christ who “suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring [us] to God.”

And our care and commitment to keeping our distance is in no way *against* the needs of the community but, again, in favor of love for our neighbors and hope for a healthy and whole community.

Just as the story of the flood in the time of Noah was not for the destruction of humanity, but for the salvation and hope and future of humanity. First Peter tells us that “[Jesus] was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit,” so that he could save even the souls of those who did not heed Noah’s warnings, who disobeyed God, and who thus perished in the flood.

First Peter points out that in the days of Noah, eight persons were “saved through water.” The wording of this is awkward - and it may just be a problem in translation - but Noah and his family were really saved **from** the waters of the flood, not through.

Nevertheless, the letter clearly states that we, as Christians, are **SAVED THROUGH WATER** in our baptism.

There’s a part of me that would like to be baptized again - even though my theology informs me that once is enough. And since I was baptized as an infant, sprinkled with the holy water of the Roman Catholic Church, I’d like to experience full immersion, not in some tank in a church, but in a lake or a river. I long to experience the power of descending under the water, dying to the old life. Holding my breath, wondering when I will breathe again. And then emerging out of the water, rising up to new life. Cleansed and refreshed. Healed and renewed. Transformed and invigorated. Into the light, out of the depths of darkness.

Not only am I a new person, but I have a new family, as the water of baptism connects every person, whether dunked or sprinkled. We are brought into the

family of God and made siblings - brothers and sisters with Jesus and with one another. The water of baptism is thicker than blood. And we are saved through this water.

But before we jump to the familiar conclusion that those who are not baptized are not saved, let me share this explanation from a contemporary theologian. “As the theology goes, our baptism represents the notion that before anything else, God loved us. What came first in each of our lives was a love from God, which is unaffected by whether or not we choose to respond or to recognize that love. God loves us - period... Regardless of our response, God’s love endures. Of equal importance in this equation is an understanding that the purpose of baptism is *not* conversion... Baptism is really about perception. It is an invitation to perceive our lives through a new lens, from a perspective that is broader than our own limited assessment of self... To begin to perceive ourselves as first and foremost loved by God, whether we think we have earned that distinction or not, is to begin to widen our spiritual, emotional, and intellectual horizons, to see beyond that which oppresses in the here and now. Rather than being consumed by the suffering, we are rejuvenated by the recognition of a larger purpose, a connection

to a power greater than that which oppresses. (Gordon McClellan, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 1)

Too often in our world - and in religion - we focus on the things that separate us, and the ways in which we are different. But this pandemic has provided us something we have in common with every person around the globe. We all share in the suffering. We are connected by the suffering.

But the good news is that we also share the pre-eminent and pervasive love of our Creator God. Like Gayle Harper wrote about the Mighty Mississippi, the water of baptism permeates and “passes through dramatic changes in geography, climate, culture, lifestyles and accents.”

As we reaffirm our baptismal vows today, may our faith and our hope and our love for one another be renewed, refreshed, reinvigorated. SAVED THROUGH WATER, may we be reconnected with the community of God’s people, the world which God so loves... to the glory of God!

AMEN.