

Congregational Church of the Messiah

Lenten Season 2009

Lessons from the Sea: “Restless Rhythms”

Psalm 8:3-9

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, 11b

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Moving across the endless deep
God’s Spirit was restless—then
Sensing that the fullness of time had come
God separated the waters creating land.
God moved upon the land and those waters
Creating all forms of life
Fish of the sea, birds in the air,
Animals and plants and living things beyond number.

And God created dynamic laws of nature
So the process of creating life would continue
And every living thing would be related to
Every other living thing and all living things
Would be related to one another and to their Creator.

Creation began that life might live.

Steadfast in principle yet ever-renewing in expression, God’s dynamic laws in nature provide the fundamental framework of the rhythm of life upon which every living thing depends. Air, water, land, fire, gravity, the cycle of life, death and living again in a different form provides new life for others in an amazing web.

Why did God create this cycle, this unending rhythm of life in which every human being takes part?

From the sea, we learn that God created the fundamental rhythms of life for at least three reasons:

1. to allow life itself to live—to be able to move independently as well as to create new life forms and relationships to other living forms beyond their original shape,
2. God wanted to establish a dependable framework so all life would be included in a network of interrelationship that spans the entire world,
3. God chose to place within human life a spiritual restlessness that can only be satisfied when we find our rest in an awesome, personal relationship with our Creator and experience there the amazing grace of being found acceptable.

I am an individual, but I am only one.
My life is singular, yet I am related to all other life.

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I have a personal relationship with my Creator God, yet I struggle to know and to trust His unconditional desire for what is best for me.

I am willing to take complete responsibility for my choices.

I pray for forgiveness when I weaken someone else. I pray for guidance even when I do not follow it. I always pray that God will accept me in the midst of my struggle and lead me through the changes in my life and I may one day feel the wind of His love blowing away all doubts and bring my life to its safe harbor in His everlasting care.

Starting from where we are now, how are we to live life to its fullest? Why does everything have to keep changing? Can't we just keep things as they are and forget that life is being altered around us?

I stand, my feet planted firmly in the sand, surrounded by the surf, as the wave rushes pass excitedly racing up the shore to see how far it can go. The wave continues, making a foamy, jagged line on the sand, ever reaching toward the dry land up the slope. Momentum pushes its foaming ribbon farther and farther away from the deep water, which supplied its energy.

Rolling over my feet as it surges inland, the foaming waters allow me to stand firmly in the sand, until reaching its peak having spent its energy in its enthusiastic drive for high land, the surf stops, hesitates, then turns back its momentum, picking up again as it begins its rush down the sloping sand, faster and faster pulled by the unseen power of gravity.

Now, the once friendly water is digging the sand out from under my feet. Faster and faster the sand is torn away, my balance slipping rapidly away, and I am forced to move my foot or fall into the rapidly disappearing foaming water.

The place where once I stood serenely and secure now changed forever has disappeared from view. The vanishing sand leads us to another lesson from the sea: It is hard to remain in one place when the ground on which we stand is shifting.

Shifting sand may represent a position that is removed, or a relationship ended, a good friend moved away. Shifting sand may initiate the questioning of a long held belief or dogma. Moving ground may represent our need to reverse a shallow opinion about someone. We discover that within that person there is a deep spirituality we had not previously recognized. So long as we have life and breath, we can choose our attitude toward events, health, friendships and goals that we believe God would want us to accomplish. So long as there is life, there is hope that we can be changed for the better.

We cannot stand still, in the same place, physically, mentally or spiritually because we are still alive. As I stand with the water swirling around me and my footing about to be washed away, I realize there is no permanent place to stand in this world except that provided by God's love. We have the ability to increase our trust in our Creator who not only gives us a mind to think and ask questions, but also a heart to listen and the will to

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act so we can move from unsteady ground and wayward thoughts to sacred ground God shows us.

The rhythms of life, as well as the sea and land created by God continue to exist. Their existence is unquestionable and God created them for our good. We can depend on them. God's rhythms of life provide a secure place to stand no matter how life's changes swirl around our feet.

We experience restless rhythms of life as good when we are in harmony with God and use them the way God intended. To fight against those rhythms of life is like telling God he made them wrong. We might feel daylight really ought to be much longer and nighttime much shorter. My granddaughter says, "Sleep is boring." If the amount of sleep we need to restore our energy could be shortened, we could have more time to accomplish all those busy things we have to accomplish before we feel we have had a good day. All we are asking is a change in the established rhythms of life for the whole world. I understand TV weatherman when reminding us of the change to daylight saving time expressed his own view: "I don't adjust well to daylight savings time. You see I am a finely tuned machine."

When we fight against God, we will always lose. We are not so strong, or wise or everlasting as God. Defying the surf and the tides, I can stand firmly in the sand for a certain length of time, but ultimately, I will have to move, or fall down because I am a living organism and cannot last forever. To be alive is to have the ability to move, to breathe, and to respond to the rhythms of life, which God has established.

Then why is the sea so restless? What makes it that way—always moving, never totally still? Even when the sea looks calm on the surface, we know that just below the surface the sea is literally teeming with life. Even in the depths of the ocean, life exists and moves in its own rhythm of life.

In some ways, you and I are like the sea. We also are created with thousands of living organisms, miraculously organized together forming our hands and feet, our bodies and our mind. Each living organism within us has its own specific function for the good of the whole so that the entire body, when knitted together with love can fulfill the will of God.

Our ability to walk, talk and shake one another's hand is simply a function of combinations of living organisms in our body being instructed to act in a certain way by our mind. Think of our amazing brains. These living organisms are organized in such a way that they give us the incredible ability to think, to believe, to pray to a God who is somehow both beyond what we can see, touch or feel, yet also closer to us than our own hands and feet.

Much to our amazement, we are able to relate to other humans spiritually, not just intellectually or physically. "Blessed be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love..." celebrates our spiritual relationship with others who know Christ and try to follow His example. The soul or spiritual reality within our physical body is created by God as part

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of the rhythm of life to help us live in harmony with all other creation. For centuries, this paradox has been hard for some people to understand and even harder for other people to believe.

Therefore, to make it clear that God really does love us and wants what is best for us in this incredible world He created, God sent the Laws and the Prophets to try to teach humans how to return to right relationship with their Creator.

Finally in the fullness of time, when the rhythm of all creation was just right, God sent His Son, Jesus Christ into the world as another human being so we could relate directly to Him. Jesus' task was to show us by example and by words that God has made it possible for each human being, a finite, imperfect, living organism, to have a personal relationship with the infinite, perfect, all powerful Creator and Sustainer of the sea and all life.

God has placed within each of us the ability to choose to turn away from God's rhythms of life and live by our own strength. He also has placed within us the deep longing to be at one with our Creator. We fall and fail to reach our potential when we try to stand against God's rhythms. When we follow Jesus we can overcome our penchant to stand against the tide, thinking we can determine life for ourselves, that we can live independent of God's rhythms of life and to use God's creations for our own selfish benefit without penalty.

Measuring our success by visible terms is easy. We declare how great we are when we have finally planted a special flower and it actually grows into a healthy plant. Do we think we really did that on our own? How much credit for the growth of that plant is truly ours? How about the sun, the water, and the earth? Do we give the credit to God for those essential elements for growing a plant? When we work in harmony with God's rhythms, we receive the blessing.

We benefit when we work with God's rhythms. Even when the tides of the restless sea rise and fall and the surface changes, we learn that God's rhythms work within us. The sea is not always restless, fighting to show its power over the temporary. From the sea, we can also learn the lesson of calmness, that deep inner peace for which we yearn. God has built into creation regular times for rest and renewal.

In the early morning the sea can be white capped, whipped by the fresh wind, the waves lifting sharply, then dashing themselves against the foaming surf before making their mad dash up the sloping sand. As the sun sets the winds having ceased, you can look across the quiet ocean, see the soft ripples leading to small waves quietly breaking upon the undisturbed sand, almost like the edges of a large lake creasing the shore.

In the safe harbor, the gently rolling of the boat from side to side brings to one's ears the peaceful lapping of the water washing up against the side of the boat, or the gurgling of the incoming water rolling over rocks glistening wet along the shore before receding back into the sea creating a veritable symphony of peaceful sights, sounds and smells of the sea.

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Below the surface, one enters a world of muted sounds and reflected rays of light. Natural motions are slowed and smoothed by the resistance of the water itself. Even the large mammals weighing tons glide effortlessly through the deep waters as though in a trance.

Why do you suppose the ocean brings such peace to human beings? People flock to the sea, not just in our culture but all over the world. The most precious view may be one of the sea. An expensive hobby may be related to scuba diving, surfing, or sailing yachts on the sea. Some of the most sublime paintings and writings have come from artists who used their skills to express their love of the sea.

The sea contains great power and mystery, yet the depth of its calm can lead to an incredibly deep peace. A peace within us is so deep it can overwhelm us, literally transforming our anxious tensions. A peace brings healing and wholeness to our restless souls.

From the sea, we learn the lesson of harmony. When we are in harmony with our Creator we experience the incredible peace of being in the same rhythm as all living things because God designed the whole world to be in harmony with itself and with its Creator. Until we share this harmony, we will always be restless because the rhythms of life were established so that all life could live in harmony.

Rotating in a celestial design, the sun, moon, and earth dance in harmony with one another. Drawn inexorably by the movement of these celestial bodies in a rhythm so grand we can only stand in amazement of it. Ocean tides rise and fall, changing land wherever it touches, bringing life, taking life away.

Yet the same Creator God who made the heavens and the earth, the celestial bodies in the sky and fish in the sea also made you and me. The Psalmist wrote: “What is man that You think about him and the children of men that You care for them? Yet You have made him a little lower than God and have crowned him with glory and majesty and given him to rule over the works of Your hands...the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea and whatever passes through the paths of the seas.” (Psalm 8:4-8)

It is written, “For everything there is a time and a season.”

Therefore let us

Rejoice in the restless rhythms of the sea
Nor fail to find the calmness that leads to harmony
With the Almighty God who made all three
And abides without and within waiting to embrace
Both you—and me.

Amen.