

“God’s Breath, Baptismal Blessings”
Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11
A Sermon preached by Carla Pratt Keyes
Ginter Park Presbyterian Church, Richmond, VA
January 8, 2012

You are my child, my beloved. With you I am well pleased: words spoken to Jesus on the day of his baptism . . . words spoken to each one of us, as God claims us, too. *You are my child, my beloved. With you I am well pleased.*

Today we remember Christ’s baptism – and our own. It is the sacrament through which we are adopted and welcomed into God’s family. It is the sign by which we share Christ’s death and resurrection, God’s power to make us whole, and the charge to do God’s work in the world.

The means of baptism is water. When I met with Vismai and Vismitha Taneti to talk about their baptism last fall, we discussed water and the various things it does. “It helps the plants to grow,” one of us said. It had been rainy that week. The water had made everything seem lush and vibrant. “We drink it when we’re thirsty,” another of us said. We need water to live! I’m always amazed to think that more than half of my body *is* water. “We wash in it,” we said. “We swim in it.” And we know that, when there is too much of it, water can get out of hand. Not just like when the bathtub overflows or ice makes the pipes burst . . . but when the floods come . . . when the tsunami strikes.

I read Daphne DuMaurier’s old book, *Rebecca*, over the holidays. The sea in that story is ever-present: its waves breaking on the shore, its spray in the air, its unspoken question: what happened to Max de Winter’s wife, the day that she died? Maxim’s young bride – his second wife – doesn’t know, doesn’t feel like she can ask. Her first glimpse of the sea betrays a deep anxiety.

You could hear the sea from here [she noticed – from a window in the west wing of Manderly.] You might imagine, in the winter, it would creep up on to those green lawns and threaten the house itself, for even now, because of the high wind, there was a mist upon the window-glass, as though some one had breathed upon it. A mist salt-laden, borne upwards from the sea. A hurrying cloud hid the sun for a moment as I watched [she said], and the sea changed colour instantly, becoming black, and the white crests with them very pitiless suddenly, and cruel, not the gay sparkling sea I had looked on first.

Not the tender, happy marriage she thought she had chosen. Not the bright, confident life she thought she had begun. This young wife cannot shake the feeling that she does not belong in her own house, that Rebecca (who preceded her there) was more confident, more capable, more beautiful, better loved than she. The tumult of the sea is like the tumult in her heart.

Too often, I think, this is how it goes. We face situations in life (even ones that we chose!) with insecurity and fear. The waters rise, the clouds darken, and we begin to feel overwhelmed by what we face. The friendship (for instance) that had been so meaningful mires in a disagreement; tempers flare and hearts tune out. The job that had seemed so great suffers in a faltering economy; the work becomes competitive and stressful. The science project that had seemed like it might be fun (!) . . . need I say more? The budget you had thought was reasonable is now unwieldy and burdensome. The medicine you thought would help has side effects you cannot stand. The clouds block out the sun, and the sea turns cruel.

Last week I attended lectures given by leaders of this city, all of whom are navigating waters that appear to be unkind. They spoke about the lingering power of racism in Richmond, the soaring problem of poverty, woefully inadequate public transportation, insufficient affordable housing, too many children dropping out of school. Not long after Ben Campbell described how third grade reading levels are used to predict future numbers of prisoners, a school board member – Don Coleman – said, “The problems in school are community problems. Schools alone can’t fix them.” Richmond schools are facing another huge cut in their budgets this year. They want to do more, but will certainly have less. Coleman said, “I’m gonna say it straight up: Pray for us. The scriptures say that nothing is impossible for God. This looks impossible to me.”

As many of you know, I practice yoga pretty regularly. One of the things I appreciate about yoga is its focus on breathing – the attention paid to something you can control. (*Ideally* you can. I know that when you’ve got asthma or a cold or something worse, even breathing can be hard.) With yoga the idea, at first, is to notice your breath coming into and out of your body. I invite you to do that for a minute. Just breathe deeply in, then breathe all the way out. Breathe in . . . and breathe out. Notice your chest rising and falling as you do. There is so much that we cannot control, but to breathe – right now – it’s something. In a yoga class they might invite you to remember your limits along with your power to act. I often find that I become more aware of myself – *my body* – alongside the other bodies in the room. Consider in your mind’s eye: your self, surrounded by other people’s selves. The building in which we sit, the city in which it’s located, the nation of which we’re a part, the globe on which we all make our home . . . each organism breathing in, and out, and our location on something so grand.

As the story goes, in the beginning (or when God started creating this marvelous globe), the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, and a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. God created the heavens and earth – out of nothing, some say. Out of that big, chaotic mess, others say. Either way, there was a dark, disordered, watery chaos to start – an ominous, threatening, rebellious, and destructive sea. Then God – who was already there and needed no creator – began to provide some order, shape, a space for life. The wind was God’s instrument. The Spirit, I mean – God’s life-force. God’s power. *God’s breath*. Walter Brueggeman says that this wind given by God blew over the waters and blew them back, making places that were dry and safe – room for life. None of *us* has the power or resources to master the waters.

The life-spaces in the midst of them . . . ? They are gifts of the creator God. And, as Brueggemann says, the wind that blows at baptism is the same wind that blew “in the beginning.” In each case that wind – that breath, that Spirit – makes new life wondrously and inexplicably possible.¹

Dan Coleman of the School Board was right: the scriptures *are* full of such stories – stories of God doing what might have seemed impossible – turning back a perilous tide, making room for life where there had been no life before. Anne Westrick spoke last week about Moses called to set God’s people free. He wouldn’t have gotten far, if God had not made a way (out of no way) – a path through the Red Sea for Moses and his people. There were years of wilderness wandering . . . the Jordan River, chilly and wide . . . Jericho’s walls so high . . . scores of invading armies . . . visions of dry bones . . . exile in a foreign land . . . insufficient oil for the lamps . . . Time and again, God made a way out of no way for the people. God parted the waters – the waters of Mary’s womb, the walls of Herod’s troops, and later, the gates of hell! God blew back the powers of sin and death, to make a space for life. *God overcame* the disciples’ anxiety, the early Christian’s divisions, the opposition all around them *to make a safe start for the church*. God has a history of facing the chaos and making in it space for life.

You and I participate in that story – that movement toward order and life. God breathes on us, in baptism, parting the waters, and accompanying us through them. God blesses us with the gifts we need – gifts of the Spirit – so that we all can move purposefully forward to receive God’s blessings and to share them – to share *God’s work* of creating new places for safety, for prosperity, for life – for us, and for all of God’s beloved children.

Our breath may be all that we can control . . . but this is not the only power available to us. When the clouds darken and the waters rise and the chaos threatens, the one who can *breathe them back* is with us to help.

¹ Brueggemann, in *Texts for Preaching – Year B* (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 1993) 97-99.