

Proper 4a Message Pentecost 3 June 1, 2008

1st Congregational UCC, Phoenix, AZ

Genesis 6:11-22;7:24;8:14-19;9:8-16;Psalm 46 excerpts inv to worship; Matthew 7:21-29

Message: Over Our Heads

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Today's lessons don't mince words. Faith isn't a frill. Faith isn't window dressing in your life. Faith isn't knowing some material – some Bible verses and some doctrine. Faith isn't as Jesus says, knowing a few buzz words like “Lord, Lord” or “I'm saved.” We read a psalm verse in the Message translation that helps to clarify what older translations mean when they say “*Be still and know* that I am God.” It's not just being still – like quieting yourself. Peterson translates it “Step out of the traffic” And then he correctly moves the word “to know” from out of our heads. Remember in the Bible “to know” is a very sensual and intimate act of the whole person. Like “Adam knew Eve and she bore a son” or David knew Bathsheba and she bore a son. Just “knowing” somebody as an act of your brain doesn't produce offspring! (You heard it first here!)

Knowing in the Biblical is about intimacy. “Step out of the traffic and take a long, loving look at me, your God.” The act of Faith, “Knowing God” is an act of the heart and the will and the whole person. We use it that way in our relationships when we describe a partner or spouse as being *faithful* or *unfaithful* to their spouse.

So having faith is stepping out of the rush of every day for intimacy with God. And just as intimacy with your main squeeze is *procreative* in making babies or *creative* in deepening your love for that person, so our intimacy with God, our loving relationship, our time together in prayer and knowing one another better, likewise is creative. In all matters of love, something happens to both parties in the loving. You are transformed in being with God – and Jesus says, that God is likewise transformed by the attention that

you have paid God! St Thomas Aquinas tried to say that God was immutable – unchanging – but that’s certainly not the God we meet in the Bible.

Today for instance, you heard that long nasty story about the flood. Every culture in the Middle East has at least one flood story, so there must have been a flood and it must have been a corker! As each culture tells its story, it gives a picture of what God or the gods are like –and what is the place of human beings. In most of the stories, the gods are either bored with business as usual and the cause the flood – or they are just being capricious. The Hebrew Bible talks about a God who was sorry that he had made human beings because they are constantly doing evil things to one another. (This story is told just after Cain kills his brother Abel and just after the angels or the sons of the gods started carrying on with the human women and their love making produced the giants that roamed the land! I’m not making this up – that’s what it says at the beginning of chapter 6!

Anyway God is so upset that everybody is treating everyone so badly that God tells the heavenly cohorts that God will destroy all the people and all the animals and everything that breathes on the earth. Apparently the fish didn’t do anything so they will continue underwater as the whole thing is flooded. And God no sooner says that God will destroy everything, than God changes the divine mind and says – well, not everything. Noah and his wife can live. And then, well, it would be hard fro them to lose their children, and well, it would be hard for the children to lose their wives and children. And well, they’d get bored without pets and well, all the animals are quite wonderful. So Noah is to build an ark for his whole extended family, and 2 or 7 of every kind of animal in the world.

From the beginning of the Bible, God is portrayed as on the one hand, the great power of the universe and on the other, the soft touch whose children have the divine wrapped around their little finger, because God loves what God makes.

I will swear to you that because this is based on unconditional love, there is nothing that you can do in this life that will make God love you more and nothing you could do that will make God love you less.

In all the other flood stories from the Middle East, the gods show no remorse for their accidents and fights that cause floodgates to open. In those stories, the gods just don't care about human beings. People just have to suffer the consequences of what the god's are doing to each other! In the Biblical story – as bad as it is that God destroys the earth, God also starts it over – and as you heard, God repented of having flooded the earth. God puts the divine warrior Bow in the clouds pointed up at the divine self! And promises *never, never again*.

The gods of the other cultures might say “oops” to a calamity, but they would never like the Hebrew story have a God declare of the divine self that he had overreached and promise that such a thing would never, never happen again. From the beginning, God is transformed by the faith that is between God and people. God and people are transformed by the love that grows between us when we spend time with God. You kiss your spouse because you love that person. You kiss and make love to that person, because you want to love them more. That's why we call it “*making love!*”

That's why frequent communion is so important. We come to the table because we love God, we love Christ because we are filled with a spiritual love, and we come to the table to love Christ more, to love God more, and to deepen our spiritual lives.

Faith isn't about words. Faith is a love story between us and God. It's about stepping out of the hectic traffic of life and *knowing* God instead of just knowing *about* God. In the Christian faith we describe that love of God as being so great in Christ, that in him, God was willing to enter into death and take it on from the inside and defeat it for all the people of the world – so that nobody has to be afraid to die. We are made, not just like Adam and Eve, but like Christ and like Christ we will slip the grasp of old death!

That assurance isn't something that comes from the head. Resurrection isn't a *brain* thing. It's a heart thing that comes from knowing God and knowing the risen Christ as we spend time with him in prayer and at the table and in doing what he does and going where he sends us.

Jesus says that faith isn't about the buzz words like “who is *saved* or who is *raptured* or who are *the elect* or who are the *chosen ones*.” In today's Gospel he says that kind of “I'm in and you're out” thinking drives him round the bend. “What *is* required,” he says, is serious obedience, doing what my Father wills.” He says that preaching the message isn't enough;” All that preaching you've been doing – (I've seen you all down there on the corner and at the golf course and at the shopping mall – preaching away!) well all that will get you nowhere! Says Jesus.

And further all the demon bashing – all those exorcisms you've been doing – those aren't going to save you! And all those God-projects all those church fairs and mission projects and good works – even those programs and activities that have everybody buzzin' about old 1st Church – even those says Jesus, “don't impress me one bit...” if they were to impress me or were “trying to make yourselves important!”

And both Jesus and the Psalm writer agree with the Genesis author that this faith thing is not about frills or homeowner improvements to your life. Faith isn't just about making your pretty good life a little better. It isn't about window dressing!

The psalm writer says our faith our loving relationship with God is amazing because he writes "God is a safe place to hide, ready to help when we are in need. Because we love God and God loves us, we can stand fearless at the cliff0dge of doom or courageous in a sea storm or earthquake. Because God lives here in our hearts and in our lives and in those who are near us, the streets for us are safe. God is the God who plants the flowers and demands that we end the wars. Our love for this God makes us step out of the craziness of this world's traffic to take a good long look at the God who surrounds as creator and stands beside us in life and death as Jesus –and who finds our hearts however clean or soiled, pure or sullied, faithful or questioning – God finds our hearts a welcome home for his Holy Spirit.

I don't know about you, but for me, this is the greatest Good News of my life – that God chooses to live with me – with all of us as the love of our lives which won't allow other gods, but welcomes us to love other people with the love we are given. Jesus says that if we use his words as the foundation and we build our lives on them and if we work these words into all the rest of our life, then we will be like the smart carpenter – the wise one – who built a house on solid rock." Rain poured down, the river flooded, the tornado hit – but nothing moved the house that was fixed on the rock.

But, he says, if you just use my words in Bible studies and in testimonies and in beating other people up with the Bible and in trying to show you are superior because you know 10 verses by heart – and you don't work these words into your life and you don't

build your life on them, then you are like the very stupid carpenter who built his house on the sandy beach. When a storm rolled in and the waves came up and the floods came down, it collapsed like a house of cards.” Where Dewey and I live in Mexico, the developer of our village decided 30 years ago that he knew better than God about where the land should be, so he filled in an indented area at the edge of the beach so he could get an extra ten beach front houses in. The people who bought those houses 30 years ago couldn’t tell. And very few knew about it until the El Nino storm 10 years later. And the waves came up and the floods came down, and all that dirt that was added to the rock disappeared and 8 and ½ of those 10 houses fell into the sea. And now the second row has beach front property. I’m glad that developer didn’t add any more dirt or those of us in the third and fourth row might have waterfront property – for a while!

Jesus says to build our lives on the rock of his message and his words and to weave them into our lives. The flood story says that God won’t ever destroy the whole world again – yet it doesn’t say that the floods and the storms of life won’t come to us just because we believe in God. Just because we have a loving faith affair with God doesn’t mean the trials of life won’t hit us.

Nor does Jesus say “if you build your lives on the bedrock of my words and build those words into our lives, that we will live charmed lives. Positive thinking is fine as far as it goes, but Jesus is direct when he says the rains and the storms and the earthquakes and the fires and all the rest will come to you just as surely as they come to the person with no faith at all! For every person whose house was saved when hurricane Katrina hit, 10 people who were praying lost their houses. The question isn’t whether you lose the house or not, or the stuff or not. The question isn’t whether or not the fire and the

flood take your home. The question isn't whether your particular job is spared when the company lets go another 1000 jobs. The question isn't whether your particular stocks go up or down in this ridiculous and manipulated market. The question isn't whether you're one of the lucky ones who gets to keep the pension you earned or whether under the fine new law of the land that you lose your pension because it's legal for the takeover company to drop the old pensions and the old pensioners. It's not whether you get to keep your insurance or join the millions (including many in this church) who are without health insurance. It's not about whether you get to keep your family together when over ½ in America are ending in divorce. It's not even whether you get the right to marry or experience your neighbors voting against your pursuit of happiness. It's not about your being able to prevent people in your family from being sick or dying or getting hooked on drugs or alcohol.

All those things happen in all families. We just keep trying to hide it from one another, and we keep trying to put it all on one more credit card, or take on the 2nd or third job. What Jesus is saying is that all those things that happen to people are just as likely to happen to people of faith as of no faith. We all get in over our heads. And I daresay that right now we are all in over our heads – and if you don't believe you are, you probably need to pay closer attention to what has happened to your investments!

What Jesus says is that when your world as you know it falls apart and you are going under for the 3rd time, whether the result of a sickness, a death, a loss of relationship, a natural tragedy, another national debacle, or your own foolish mistake of the bad judgment of somebody dear to you, if our lives are built on the foundation of Jesus' words – even if we're over our heads – we will have hope for our new beginning –

whether in this life or the life to come. The people loved to hear Jesus because he lived the words he taught them. He asks from us what he asks of himself.

And what are those words of Jesus, well this is Matthew's Jesus speaking, so let's hear what kind of words Jesus is talking about: *The Sermon on the Mount* is from Matthew's Jesus including the Beatitudes: Blessed are the poor in Spirit – which means “how blessed are you when you know you need God, for God's Kingdom is already yours. How blessed are those who mourn and grieve unashamedly for God can comfort that kind of person in the way that God can't get to the person who is ‘toughing it out.’ How blessed are you who are peacemakers in the midst of those who make war, for you peacemakers prove that you are God's children. How blessed are you who hunger and thirst for what is the right and the good and the true for you shall be filled with those good things. You'll work for justice and your work will bear fruit. How blessed are you when people persecute you for standing up for and doing the right thing. Some won't approve, but I love it! Matthew's Jesus says “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength and Love your neighbor as you love yourself, and these two commandments the whole Bible depends on loving God, loving your neighbor and loving yourself!”

Matthew's Jesus says “You have heard it said ‘an eye for an eye’ it's even in the Bible, but I say to you turn the other cheek, walk the extra mile. Prove you are my disciples.’ “Forgive others and you will be forgiven.” Matthew's Jesus also says that whatever you do for the poor, or the prisoner or the sick or the widow and orphan or the immigrant you are doing for God. “When you have done it for the least you have done it for me.” Matthew's Jesus says “Go into all the earth and teach all I have commanded you. And lo

I am with you always - even to the ends of the earth and the ends of the age and to the end of your life.” Faith for the Christian, is, in part, being willing to live (counter-culture) these teachings of Jesus, making them the foundation for our spiritual house and part of the fabric of the house and the interior design.

And Christian faith also means, that when the waves are coming up and the floods are coming down and we’re in over our heads, when we’re up to our eyeballs in alligators, when we’re stuck in the cultural traffic jam full of people honking to go ahead and the only place the cars at the front of the line are is going over the cliff, it’s time to take stock, to take inventory, to step out of the traffic and take long loving look at the God who loves us and who made us – and to ask for help.

Scott Peck, who wrote “The Road Less Traveled” and several other quality books, was on the lecture circuit and was leading a retreat being held at a convent. While he is teaching all this lofty stuff he has neglected his own life and family and the whole marriage has fallen apart. Sister Lucia was in charge of the guests. He describes her as “She was 87 if she was a day.” Peck had a couple of whiskeys with the retreatants. He writes:

“Because I’d had a couple of drinks and because I was in a good deal of emotional pain, , and because she had such a kindly old face, I found myself telling Sister Lucia how badly I felt because I had failed in my marriage. “That’s wonderful” she exclaimed!

“Lord, Scotty,” I thought, “get a couple of drinks in you and you go shooting your mouth off because this nun’s got a kindly old face, when the reason it’s so kindly is probably because she’s got no brain left behind it.” I spoke to her more loudly as if she were senile: “You don’t understand. I failed in my marriage.”

“Oh I’m so glad for you” she answered. By this time I was becoming seriously annoyed. I practically shouted at her. “NO, no, you haven’t heard what I’ve been saying. Probably you’ve got a hearing problem. You’re quite entitled to have a hearing problem at your age, my dear...let’s just drop the whole subject.”

Sister Lucia said “I’ve heard and understood you perfectly, young man. You’ve been telling me that you have failed at your marriage and I’m so glad for you. Do you

know how terrible it would be never to fail?” I recollected certain people I’d know who felt they had never failed – and just how insufferable they were! And I began to think that maybe she did have some gray matter left behind those intelligent eyes. It occurred to me that perhaps it was no accident that both Sister Lucia and I were attempting to follow a Lord of Failure, a man executed at an early age in the manner of a political criminal, spat on by enemies and betrayed by friends.”

“I also think it no accident that my marriage with Lily began to considerably improve about that time. For what happened after I’d concluded I’d failed at my marriage was that at some level I gave up trying to *make* it work. And that meant I gave up trying to *change Lily*. She decided too that she had failed at the marriage and gave up trying to make it work by trying to change me. Furthermore, I suspect it is no accident that since that time, both she and I seem to have done a good deal of changing.” (Scott Peck in “*A World Waiting to be Born* Bantam Books, 1993)

When the floodwaters are over our heads, we need to stop –to be still and to know that God is God and we are not. We need to admit that we’re in trouble much deeper than what we can handle by ourselves. Shifting the metaphor, we need to step out of the traffic and take that long, loving look at the God who loves us. We need to ask for help and guidance, as, one more time, we turn our lives over to this loving God. Amen.