

Easter 6C
Peace, Seattle
May 1, 2016
John 5:1-9

TROUBLED WATER

On a clear, moonless night, a half-dozen figures move silently through the fields and along the river trails and hollows of a southern landscape.

Linked to each other through a single length of cloth grasped in their hands, they move urgently through the darkness, carrying on their backs all that they possess in this world.

And every little while, their leader stops to fix her eyes on the sky and one constellation in particular—the Drinking Gourd—and the single star to which it points: the North Star; for in that star lies all that their hearts long for.

For these figures straining through the night are slaves, running for freedom, running to new life, traveling the Underground Railroad.

Their leader is Harriet Tubman; they call her MOSES. Born into slavery in Maryland she escaped her own chains and went on to become the most well known of all the Underground Railroad's "conductors." During a ten-year span she made 19 trips into the South, escorting over 300 slaves to freedom.

The music of African American spirituals played a significant role on those journeys to freedom. Because many escaping slaves knew the secret meanings of these songs, they could be used to signal many things.

You know the chorus of one of those spirituals, WADE IN THE WATER:

**Wade in the water, Wade in the water children
Wade in the water, God's going to trouble the water..."**

What do these words refer to?

On the one hand, the song recalls the story of Moses leading the Hebrew people out of slavery under Pharaoh and into the freedom of the Promised Land.

"God's going to trouble the water" takes us to the shores of the Red Sea, where God's people, with Pharaoh's army close behind, witness God's saving power as God stirs up the sea and parts the waves so his people pass safely to the other side.

GOD'S GOING TO TROUBLE THE WATER means God is on our side now like he was on their side then. And God will bring us safely to the other side.

But the troubled water is about more than just that scene.

The troubled water is also about the waters of baptism, the waters of the Jordan River, which mark the boundary between the old and the new.

These baptismal waters are troubled because they signal the end of the old ways of trusting our selves and the beginning of a new ways of placing our trust fully in God's hands.

These troubled waters are full of promise, but they are full, too, of challenge and change.

Once you pass through these waters, nothing can remain the same. For the life of the baptized is a life not only of placid pools, but also a river of rapids with turbulent waves that twist and turn us, challenging what we know and even threatening, at times, what we hold dear.

Wade in the water is God's invitation to go deep with Jesus Christ.

And when we wade in those baptismal waters, we never wade alone.

Christ wades in the water with us, and gives us a name and a destiny and a community to surround us and to buoy us up when we get in over our heads.

There's still another layer, too, to this spiritual. It's the layer that Harriet and others called upon as they lead men and women and children to freedom on the Underground Railroad:

Humming the tune for Wade in the Water meant it was time to get off the trail and into the river, to make sure the hound dogs couldn't sniff out their trail.

Wade in the water, God's going to trouble the water.

Harriet, they say, would allow no second thoughts from those she was helping to freedom.

She assured them God would indeed aid their efforts. And to make the point even clearer, she'd promise to shoot any one who gave a thought to turning back.

Wading in the water with Harriet Tubman was a profoundly troubling experience.

But in all her trips as a conductor, she never lost a single passenger.

And now, it turns out, 160+ years after she began her career as a conductor on the Underground Railroad, we're going to see Harriet's portrait every time we look at a \$20 bill.

During this Easter season our texts have invited us to ask, WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO LIVE THE RESURRECTED LIFE? WHAT DOES FOLLOWING A RISEN LORD LOOK LIKE?

In today's gospel we join Jesus in Jerusalem, by the Sheep Gate, at a pool called Bethzatha.

Along the porticos that surround the pool lay invalids and wounded people of all kinds—blind, lame, disfigured, paralyzed. Each one of them is there waiting for the waters of the pool to be stirred up because they believe that by entering the pool when the waters are stirred, they will be made well.

Jesus focuses his attention on one man, who we learn has been ill for 38 years.

We don't know much about the man, but we can't help but wonder how a person spends 38 years waiting for healing.

- Maybe he came to this place filled with hope, and he's someone for whom some semblance of hope still abides.
- Maybe, as the years have passed, he's witnessed others wade into the troubled waters, and come out whole.
- Maybe he figures it's just a matter of time before his number is up, and his turn will come.
- Or maybe, after all these years, spending his days at the pool has become so automatic, such a routine, that even though his strategy has proven to be a pathetically ineffective, he still persists because he can't see any other options, and no one is willing to level with him and say:
THIS ISN'T WORKING.

I knew a man once, Ron, who was diagnosed with advanced prostate cancer.

He was so caught up in denial that up to the very moment of his death, he refused to talk about the possibility that the cancer would end his life.

His family decided not to press the issue for fear that it would upset him. They never had an honest conversation with Ron about his impending death. And consequently they never got to tell him what his life had meant to them. Wading into that troubled water was more than they could cope with.

So along comes Jesus, and he asks the man an honest question, but a question with, I think, some bite to it:

DO YOU REALLY WANT TO BE MADE WELL?

It sounds harsh; but the truth can be that way.

Jesus listens to the man's explanations, and with a kind of impatient flourish, he tells the man:

STAND UP, TAKE YOUR MAT AND WALK!

And immediately, the man stands up, picks up his mat and walks.

The irony, of course, is that by healing this man on the Sabbath, Jesus steps into hot water of his own. But he's willing to do whatever it takes to show that man...to show us...what it means to take the risk of trusting God completely.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR US TO LIVE OUR LIVES AS PEOPLE WHO'S DESTINY IS NOT DEATH BUT LIFE?

This Friday I'll be officiating at a Memorial Service for a retired Seattle Police Officer named Ray Johnson. Just before Christmas in 1975, Ray was working an evening security shift at a grocery store when an armed robber held up the store.

When Ray tried to intervene the robber shot him twice in the chest. But the bullets didn't stop Ray. Ray pursued the man down the street, tackled him, and after taking a few more shots, narrowly missing Ray, the robber ran away.

Ray survived, because, as it turned out, DuPont was testing out a new material they thought could be useful to police officers around the country. They made 200 vests out of the stuff in a test run, and 50 of those 200 vests were shipped to Seattle.

A select number of patrol officers were asked to try them out for fit and function over a two week trial. Ray was one of them. He had the vest on that night. And it saved his life. Ray was the first police officer in the nation whose life was saved by the new material: KEVLAR.

Of course, when it comes to firearms, many more people have been less fortunate than Ray was. Every week in our cities and across the world violence stalks the lives of the innocent and the guilty.

These deaths are stark reminders that while sin and death have been decisively defeated through Christ's cross and empty tomb, still the violent forces of the world, and the methods of the evil one, do their level worst to prove that Christ's resurrection means nothing.

Our task, as a community apprenticed to Jesus, is to show the world, in how we live, that these forces are wrong.

What does it mean to live the resurrected life?

It means that all our craving for self preservation; all the pathetic tactics we cling to in our lives in spite of their ineffectiveness; all the strategies we use to justify harming our neighbor; all our denials and all our excuses....all of it—the whole kit and caboodle—is dead and buried.

Easter for the disciples began behind locked doors. As fear's captives, they were paralyzed by the death of their Lord. His appearance among them as the Risen One was the catalyst for redefining what was possible.

**Christ stands in the waters, stretching his hand out to you and to me.
He beckons us to wade in the water...even when...especially when...it's troubled water.**

Amen.