

## De Profundis: Out of the Depths

Psalm 130 & Luke 5: 1-11

*21<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 24<sup>th</sup> August 2008*

It's good to be back in the pulpit this morning and seeing your smiling faces. I spent this week doing a lot of listening and getting brought up to speed on some of what's been going on around here the last couple of months. I knew that my leaving, particularly at a critical time in the life of the church, just as we were about to completely transform the look of this building, both inside and outside, was generating just a little bit of stress and anxiety (okay, maybe a lot). But I had every confidence that the church would still be standing when I got back (and it is); that the renovations would proceed smoothly (and they are); and that you would be in very capable hands with the Session, Dorothy Boulton, Joan Berry, and Terry Schoener preaching most Sundays (and you definitely were). I wasn't worried or concerned. I am extremely grateful to all of them, particularly Dorothy for carrying an extra burden of responsibility while I was away – and which she quickly placed back upon my shoulders. In my travels and conversations, I told folks that I was very proud of this congregation, because you embarked on this renovation in the midst of sabbatical, and that you told me to, gave me permission to go during this season. It was really very healthy – it spoke volumes about your trust in yourselves to do this, and I could trust you to make it happen. It made it clear that this renovation is not my vision, but *yours*; it's not about me, but about *you*, it belongs to the soul *of* and souls *within* this congregation faithfully stepping out into the future God is preparing for us.

Listening this week to some of the stories, it's clear that you discovered some new things about yourselves. It's exciting to hear all that's been going on and it's great to see all the changes to the building. We're being stretched with this renovation and perhaps no entity is feeling the stress and strain more than the staff of the Child Care Center as they open their doors tomorrow. Change produces stress and the stress perhaps reveals some of our weak points. Perhaps this is why we are reluctant to change, because we can't stand the stress. But the change and the stress also call us to respond to these challenges with *greater* commitment and focus, they summon within us emotional and spiritual resources we didn't think we had or have had to use in quite some time. I can't help but think that we will be a healthier, stronger community for having lived through this. Transformation and growth are impossible without change and the stress that comes with it. The challenge in those moments is not allow fear to hinder the good that can come from change. Fear can destroy so much within us – it can kill our souls – and the soul of any church. Fear can hold us back, but Jesus always

says to us, “Do not be afraid.” But Jesus also continues to say “Step out.” Or, as in this story in Luke, “Go deep.”

So what have I been up to? Over the next couple of months I will gradually share some of my experiences and discoveries. I can’t thank you enough for providing the time and space to disengage, to step away, to reconnect with myself and with God. I am extremely grateful for the time to reflect upon my life and my ministry. I’m thankful for your prayers, your support, your encouragement, and for really giving me space. Dorothy did an excellent job of keeping me in the dark about everything – that is, until last Monday.

As you know, the theme for the sabbatical was “a vast, broad, space,” a line taken from Job (36:16) describing life in the Spirit as a vast, broad, space where there is no cramping.<sup>1</sup> The hope was to make space in my schedule, my heart, my mind, my spirit for myself and for God. I was searching for breathing space, to be open to the movement of the Holy Spirit. And I hoped to go to places that were expansive, that were open and vast, to live in and near such places that would enlarge my soul and vision. I went to New Orleans and met with an author, an expert on dream analysis;<sup>2</sup> I went to a monastery in New Mexico; lived for a week in the Blue Ridge mountains in Northern Virginia, reading, writing, hiking; six weeks in Europe, spending almost a month in Scotland, including a week in Iona (one of the holiest places on the planet); a pilgrimage to see a painting I’ve wanted to see since I was in college, in a small museum in Colmar, France (just north of Basel); a brief time in Geneva before flying to Rome and spending more time there, going into the catacombs. (I felt like I was reversing the movement of Protestants, even the history of Christianity – Maryland, Edinburgh, London, Colmar, Basel, Geneva, Rome, right into the catacombs). I visited Pompeii, and spent a week on the Amalfi Coast; there was a week in New Jersey connecting with family and dear friends who were mentors of mine from my home church; then just last Friday, a quick visit to Houston to meet with James Hollis, a Jungian psychoanalyst,

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<sup>1</sup> *Ruach*, Hebrew for Spirit, “creates space. It sets in motion. It leads out of narrow places into wide vistas, thus conferring life. To experience the *ruach* is to experience what is divine not only as a person, and not merely as a force, but also as space – as the space of freedom in which the living being can unfold. That is the experience of the Spirit: ‘Thou has set my feet in a broad place.’ (Psalm 31:8). ‘You also he allured out of distress into a broad place where there is no cramping.’ (Job 36:16). According to Kabbalistic Jewish tradition, one of God’s secret names is MAKOM, the wide space. If God’s Spirit is experienced as this broad, open space for living conferred on created beings, then it is easy to understand the spatial designations which declare that people live ‘in’ God’s spirit, and experience God spatially as ‘breadth.’” Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Fortress Press, 1993), 42-43.

<sup>2</sup> Rodger Kamenetz, *The History of Last Night’s Dream: Discovering the Hidden Path to the Soul* (HarperOne, 2008).

author, and director of the Jung Center in Houston. His books were a companion throughout the sabbatical. I spent an entire day and a half with him in Washington in early May at a workshop at the Jung Society. I've learned so much from him, but had also had a lot of questions. I sent him a letter of thanks from Iona, he replied within twenty-four hours, and said he would be available to talk. So last Friday he spared three wonderful hours, offering a rich, meaningful discussion.

In early May, Susan Hutton picked me up at 5:30 a.m. to catch a flight to Santa Fe, New Mexico. My destination was a Benedictine monastery, called Christ in the Desert, about two hours north of Santa Fe, situated at the end of a canyon, an hour off the main road, in a desert environment that was austere, bleak, yet beautiful. I was there for almost a week, spanning Pentecost, attending *most* of the seven, daily services in the abbey, that begin at 4 a.m. (made the 4 a.m. services twice), chanting the psalms (in English and Latin), and had a lot of time to think, to pray, to read, to sleep, but also to listen. One of the brothers in the abbey said they often get reservations from people in New York or Philadelphia who book three weeks there, hoping to “schedule” a “spiritual experience,” to detox, to cleanse their spirits. But by the third day, many of them leave, because the silence is too much. It takes about three days for the internal chatter of our minds to stop. By the third day, you either embrace the silence or you resist and say, it's time to go. When the internal chatter stops and you have no distractions (such as the regular routine of life, or email, television, or schedules) and just stop, all you're left with is yourself, or maybe you and God. And in that space, that vast open space of the heart, we see both what is good within and maybe what is not so good, we see the things we can affirm, but also our demons. We can run from this inner life, deny it, avoid it, fill it with all kinds of junk or we can confront our demons, like Jesus did, also in a desert. We can go into our heart of hearts, into the depths, and see what we discover there. And what we will discover in the depths, I believe – but it's more than belief – I *know*, in the depths, is the abundance of God's Being, if we trust, if we risk, if we dare.

“Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch (Luke 5:4).” Jesus finishes up this encounter, by saying, “Follow me and you'll be catching people.” Very often we see his text about discipleship and evangelism, a matter of “catching” people, and it is. But those words, “Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch,” are too poetic, too profound, to be overlooked. Jesus is dealing with metaphor here, of course. Whenever I read this verse I have only one association or metaphor. When Jesus tells us to put out into the deep, I can't help but hear this as a summons to go *down and in*, to enter into the depths of my being, my soul, my heart, my psyche (whatever you want to call it). *The sea is a metaphor for the heart, the unconscious, what lies below the surface of awareness. It's an invitation to go inward, an inward turn that leads to such an*

*overabundant yield that it cannot be contained.* By inward, I don't mean being self-focused, or selfish, or ego-centric navel-gazing. For some, being introspective or inward is considered a luxury they can't afford, given all that is claiming their time. But, I would argue that ignoring the depths, avoiding the inner life, will eventually demand a heavier price.

What do I mean? By going inward we have a clearer sense of who we are – but also discover that in the depths we will experience the abundance of God. The psalmist knew this. “Out of the depths, I cried unto thee, O LORD (Psalm 130:1).” It's from within, from the depths of our being as humans that we experience our faith in God, our relationship with Yahweh. It's in the depths that we also experience the pain and anguish of doubt and fear, and yet still reach out to God. It all comes from within.

It was John Calvin (1509-1564), right at the beginning of his *Institutes* who said, writing from his experience, that knowledge of oneself leads to knowledge of God and a knowledge of God leads to a knowledge of oneself. And sometimes it's difficult to discern which comes first and which is which. But the experience is known inwardly, in our hearts, in the depths. The more he knew about himself, the more he discovered about God, in the depths.<sup>3</sup>

The use of the word “depth” here in verse four, *bathos*, implies immensity, expansiveness, a spatial depth either of water or earth. It's a metaphor rich in meaning, something profound, fundamental, which undergirds this world, which sustains our lives, our reality. In Gnosticism, God is referred to as *bathos*, the depth, the source of all our being. God, not so much “up there,” high and lofty, but deep and unfathomable. And in 1 Corinthians 2, Paul explains that before the Holy Spirit speaks to the human spirit, it has first searched the very depths of God (v. 10). And so the Spirit teaches from the depths of God to the depths of the human spirit. So that when the Spirit speaks to us it has gone through the depths of God, and conveys the depths of God to us – *from depth to depth*. Amazing.

All this goes on in the deep, not on the surface, not amid shallow superficialities, but in the deep. There's something inherently significant here in the Jewish and Christian experience, that we encounter God in the depths, when we risk going out into deep water and let down our nets. We could almost say that Jesus is calling us to *grow*

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<sup>3</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559). “Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But, whole joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern. In the first place, no one can look upon himself without immediately turning his thoughts to the contemplation of God, in whom he ‘lives and moves’ [Acts 17:28].” I. I.1.

*down*, to grow down before we can reach out to others. We could say we're being warned to be leery of religious teachings and practices that are shallow, superficial, and actually prevent us from going deep, because the surface always disappoints.<sup>4</sup>

*De Profundis*. Latin for, out of the depths. Depth. From the beginning of the sabbatical right to end, this was the current running through my experience. The importance of depth – of facing my fears and my demons and going in, of the power of God known in the depths of my being, of connecting with the source of my life. It was both discovery, but also *rediscovery*.

Let me explain: On the 25<sup>th</sup> February 1984, I read a sermon by Paul Tillich that resonated with me and shook me; it was called “The Depth of Existence.” I was in college. Now, I know, you're thinking – what an odd child – not a lot of college students are reading Tillichian existential sermons in their sophomore year. What can I say? I was a nerd. What mattered most was that I was listening to my soul and knew that I wanted to live in the depths and not on the surface. I wanted to go down, deep and discover the One in whom I live and move and have my Being (Acts 17:28). Yes, going deep is painful and uncomfortable, because we're forced to confront things in the dark waters of the mind and the past. But I knew that underneath every pain and every grief, there is joy, a joy that can only be found by going deep. It was the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), once said, “The world is deep, and deeper than the day could read. Deep is its woe. Joy deeper still than grief can be. Woe says: Hence, go! But joy wants eternity, wants deep, profound eternity.” Curiously, while reading that sermon, I was also listening to Mahler's *Third Symphony* (I know, I'm a nerd), listening to the fourth movement of the symphony, which contains a soprano solo singing this same exact text from Nietzsche. Carl Jung (1875-1961) would call this synchronicity – something of significance that I need to pay attention to, for it gives direction to what matters in my life.

In college, I reaffirmed my faith in Christ because Jesus spoke to the deepest needs of my soul and felt called to live in the depths and to help God's people risk living in the depths, to live lives of profound meaning and joy, touched by eternity, by God, and I believed the church was the best place to do this. It's also what Nietzsche was looking to the church to do in the nineteenth century, only in the end to be disappointed by the institution. Nietzsche is perhaps best known for being the atheist

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. quotation from worship bulletin, theologian Paul Tillich (1886-1965), “Why have [people] always asked for truth? Is it because they have been disappointed with the surfaces, and have known that the truth which does not disappoint dwells below the surfaces in the depth?” From his sermon, “The Depth of Existence” in *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), 53.

who declared “God is dead.” But we need to remember that he was going to be a minister. In the end he turned away because he could not find there a way to access the depths. I don’t think he literally meant God was dead. The church and its *god* were dead to the presence of *God*. In his spirit he kept searching the depths, but didn’t look to the church to help.

Everywhere I went on the sabbatical, I was reminded of the call to the depths. Whether it was in the deserts of New Mexico or the Blue Ridge Mountains, going back to Mendham to preach at the funeral for a dear friend who died in early June, or going to Scotland and being surrounded by water, everywhere the deep fathoms of the North Sea or the Atlantic Ocean confronted me, even sailing on the Mediterranean Sea off of Italy reminded me of the depths. I was reminded of this in the Unterlinden Museum in Colmar, looking for one painting (which I’ll talk about another time) only to discover a different one, by one of my favorite artists George Rouault (1871-1958). The painting spoke to me before I knew who painted it or what it was named. Guess what he called it? “*Out of the Depths.*”

But, you see, I’m like Simon Peter in this text; and my guess is many of you are too. We are reluctant to do what the Lord tells us. We are reluctant to go where the Lord sends us. And we come up with all kinds of excuses why we can’t or won’t go into the depths. You can almost hear Peter mumbling under his breath, “I can’t believe we’re heading back out there. What does this guy know about fishing, anyway, he’s just a preacher.” “Sure, Jesus, whatever you say, I’ll humor you, if you say so, I’ll let down the nets. What a know-it-all.”

“They caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break.” And they signaled for another boat to collect the catch, and then both started to sink.”

And what did Peter do? He fell down at Jesus’ feet.

And what did he say? “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” “For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch they had taken.”

See what can happen when we listen to the Lord, when we put out into the deep and let down our nets for a catch? If we’re honest, we’re all like Simon Peter, who when confronted by the power, abundance, and holiness of God, standing in awe and amazement, recoils and says, “Too much, I can’t handle, I can’t stand it or withstand it,” and he doesn’t (literally), he falls to his knees. It’s too much. It’s all too much. With God it’s always too much, who is The Too Much!

Then he says to the Holy One, “Go away.” Go away. I am a sinner. I am not worthy for such a revelation. I don’t deserve to witness such an event. I’m not good enough to experience this kind of abundance, this kind of generosity, this kind of grace. Do you ever think that? I do. But I think it’s often an excuse, it’s a defense mechanism against living from the amazing claim that God is within us, and available to us. You see, when we go into the depths, eventually we will find God, but I think the knowledge and possibility of the “too much” scares us, which is why we are reluctant to go there, and why it’s easier to live on the surface with a superficial faith or why the church gets sidetracked in stupid debates and arguments, or why we simply tell God, “Go away.” I know it scares me. Maybe because the more we acknowledge what’s within, the greater our responsibility becomes. “Be present in my life, God,” we might pray; but not too much. Show up, God, but don’t show me something that’s going to cause my boat to sink, or what I can’t handle, or that’s going to mess up my world, or my value-system, or my career plan, nothing that would elicit that kind of change. And so we keep the Holy at bay, “domesticating transcendence,” keeping it tame, and we pay the price for it – in our hearts and in the church, and the world suffers because of it.<sup>5</sup>

But what if there’s all this abundance in the depths of your soul? What if there really is “a great sea surging within us”?<sup>6</sup> In ancient times, the Romans rarely sailed in open seas across the Mediterranean. They hugged the shore and went from port to port in order to get to their destination. But Jesus calls us to put out into the deep, face our fears, but don’t let them determine the journey, let down our nets, dare for the sake of discovering what’s truly available to us in God.

I think James Hollis is right when he says there’s one thing that blocks us from going deep and it is fear. And this fear often takes three forms: fear of loneliness, fear of rejection, and, most of all, he says from his years as a psychoanalyst, is the “fear of largeness.”<sup>7</sup> Largeness. That’s what I think scares Peter so much.

What if there’s all this abundance in your soul, largeness, potential, possibility, love, mercy, generosity, joy? What if it’s all there, given by the Source Himself, waiting

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<sup>5</sup> The phrase “domestication of transcendence” comes from the title of a book by theologian William Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the quotation from the worship bulletin, James Hollis, *The Archetypal Imagination* (College State: Texas A & M University Press, 2000), “As children we listened to the sound of the sea still echoing in the shell we picked up by the shore. That ancestral roar still links us to the great sea which surges within us as well.” (119).

<sup>7</sup> Hollis, 104.

to be caught and shared? Setting fear aside, what is the Lord asking you do with it? What would we do? We can begin to understand how disciples could leave everything behind and follow, because of the greater abundance their lives would yield when they listen to him and go deep. The same is true for us. It's all worth the risk.

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