

Scripture: Genesis 8:20-22, 9:8-17 Mathew 4:18-22

Sermon: Deserving. A few months ago I was at a dinner party with some friends where I met a contingent of German people. We were sitting around talking about childhood memories and things that traumatized us when we were kids. The Germans in the room began talking about this book, entitled “Streuble Peter,” which I have been told is translated as something like “Messy Peter.” This book is about a little boy, named Peter, who is messy, obviously. On the cover is a big picture of Peter with long hair and long fingernails. The moral of the story is that it is important to take care of our hygiene and if we don’t, we are punished. Peter goes to bed one night with long and dirty fingernails and wakes up in the morning with his fingers cut off. That’ll teach him I guess. That is what he deserves, having his fingers cut off if he can’t clean underneath his nails and keep them trimmed. The story then tells of all the other ways in which Peter doesn’t care for himself and all the other things that he deserves to have happen to him.

I had my share of traumatizing lessons when I was a kid, but if I had Streuble Peter read to me at bedtime, I could imagine myself sneaking in the bathroom all night with fingernail clippers and strong soap to keep my fingers and hands clean so that I could salvage them from the magic finger eaters. The writers of the story may say this would be a success.

Messy Peter has been making me think quite a bit about this understanding that has been drummed into my head, which I haven’t really wanted to admit to. That if we are bad, God will punish us. And if bad things happen to us, then we did something to deserve it. Late last year I found myself talking to a friend, bemoaning my life situation. I had just experienced a very painful break-up and was grieving the loss. And as I was talking with my friend, I was telling her how lonely and betrayed and abandoned I felt, how shocked and confused I was, how much work I had put into this broken relationship and now it was over, it wasn’t what I deserved, she was gone, and there was nothing I could do about it. And then I said, shocking myself, “I don’t really believe this, but what have I done to deserve this? Is God punishing me, making me so lonely and tired and anxious because I *did* something?” I probably have said these words “what did I do to deserve this?” many times in my life, but this time they hit me like a ton of bricks. Is this who I think God is? Now, this is not the God that I believe in, that I was taught about in Sunday school and in seminary. I believe in a God that is compassionate, on the side of justice, a God that is loving and holds me in my brokenness and loneliness. But somewhere in the back of my head, I still have this lingering “I deserve to be punished,” just like Messy Peter, and it is God who is punishing me. Somehow isn’t God supposed to keep me from the pain of confronting myself, from the confusion of the world around me, from the loneliness all of us feel, and the loss all of us experience. Did God abandon me as my partner abandoned me? My friend on the other end of the phone quietly said, “I don’t think it is a matter of deserving or not. God is holding you and you are simply learning how to deal with loneliness and anxiety and abandonment.”

You know that myth that Santa is looking at you all year long from the North Pole, keeping track of when you are naughty or nice, and that will determine what you deserve for Christmas: coal or beautiful presents. That myth explains it all, when I feel particularly undeserving of God’s mercy. Santa saw how naughty I was.

How often we have heard people say, and have probably said ourselves, that we are blessed with material things. I have said it, not that long ago, I am sure, as I have been “counting my blessings” in this difficult time. I have a nice, large, cheap apartment, a real blessing in this city, and good friends and a warm bed to sleep in and food in my kitchen cabinets. I really am blessed. And in plenty of middle and upper class Presbyterian mostly white churches I have visited or been a member of, we have prayed for all our blessings, including the wealth we have to distribute to the poor. But as Dr. Callender so beautifully said last Sunday, a “blessing” is not a

material possession that we get, often through unjust and unfair means, but a feeling of wholeness, at-peace-ness...but this doesn't stop me from throwing around the word "blessing" all the time.

The real reason that this idea of "blessing" being coupled with our understanding of how much stuff we have and how far we are on the economic ladder bugs me so much, is because it excuses generations and generations of injustice and abusive behavior. If I am blessed because I have a rent-stabilized apartment does that mean that the people across the street who had to move out because they couldn't afford my neighborhood anymore, aren't blessed, aren't deserving, that God is punishing them for something they did wrong? Are the rich Presbyterians I know blessed because they have three cars and country homes while everyone else who doesn't fall into this category is being punished?

All of us have more than someone else, regardless of how little we have and so if we attribute our material goods to how blessed or not blessed we are, it can just lead us to one big cycle of denial and guilt, depression and inaction.

Unfortunately, religion, and particularly Christianity, I find, has been used over and over again to blame and justify oppression and division.

The story of Noah and the arc is far too often simply retold as that God was angry with God's people and then destroyed the world. But there was this lucky guy named Noah and he had a family and a bunch of barnyard animals and he could choose 2 of each barnyard animal, a momma animal and a daddy animal, and Mrs. Noah, their 2.5 children and they got to go on a ride on the boat that Noah made to be saved from God's anger at creation because we are so bad. This is the point of the story that I got when I was a kid, not through any particular Sunday school teacher or my parents or the Golden Kids "Noah's arc" book that I had when I was a child, but somehow through the world I lived in, this was the point I learned from this story.

And now we find ourselves on the outset of the tragedy of the recent tsunami, that has already lost the consciousness of our front page news. Some people have said that the flood story foreshadows the recent devastation, and that the people who lived in the countries that were destroyed, many of them non-Christian and even Muslim, deserved to be destroyed because of how angry they made God.

And then we have all the ways that Scripture has been used to justify white supremacy, misogyny, homophobia, to oppress anyone who may threaten the power structures of the bedrock of this country. You know the story which has been named incorrectly and interpreted improperly as the "Curse of Ham" in Genesis, used to keep African people bound together on slave ships, ripped from their homes, to come to this country, justifying slavery, the raping of black women, the economic, spiritual, physical and emotional abuse of all people with African heritage in this country. This history which all of us who live on this land have inherited and continue to suffer from is based on a lie and an abuse of who God has created us to be. This is a history that continues to hold us in all bondage and division, that we continue to reinforce and misconstrue.

And we have how a select passage in Romans has been used for generations to keep gay and lesbian people out of churches and leadership, as justification for killing them at times, because some have the audacity to believe that they have the final say on how to interpret Scripture and Scripture was telling them that we are sinful and therefore are better off and deserve to be dead. And we know how select passages of Scripture are used to tell women that they have to listen to their husbands, even if their husbands beat and rape them. And how Scripture has been used to keep women out of leadership roles, in the world and the church. And again, we all inherit the pain of this history.

And then, when Jerry Falwell blamed the ACLU, feminists, gays, pagans and everyone else he didn't like for the destruction of the Twin Towers on September 11. He said these people made God so angry that He made a divine intervention and killed 2,000 people. We deserved it. God is angry and creates destruction and abandons us.

I am here to say to you this morning that the Christian journey is not about using Scripture to either justify wealth at the expense of others or oppression, violence and brutality. And considering there are fewer and fewer churches in this country and world who believe such a thing, it is our responsibility to stand up for a God who calls us into a deeper and more complicated relationship with God, one of self-reflection, action and change. We all know about the destruction of the world, we experience it every single day. And the world desperately needs a new message, the Good News, that it **isn't** condemned, that it **isn't** being destroyed because we deserve it, that there **is** another way.

In the beginning times God was full of grief with humanity, for humanity was destroying itself and not listening to the dreams of God. God continued to create every day, as God continues to create even today. But God was grieving and saddened by the state of human affairs, even at the beginning. God takes with uncompromising seriousness God's own purposes for creation. God had expectations and would **not** abandon the world. But God's pain with the world was similar to the pain of a woman in childbirth, for God took it on too, standing with creation. It was the same pain through which Noah would deliver humanity from the destruction of the world.¹

And God was impatient and sent a flood. But to not abandon all of humanity, God created a way to save us, God gave the opportunity for Noah to build an ark and in it save God's creation. And it wasn't fun in that boat, there were so many animals and dirtiness and messiness and sickness and disease, because they were in the middle of a flood on a boat for we don't know how long. This boat wasn't a cruise ship with a pool and open bar, this was more like a slave ship that was too full and without enough food or warm blankets and no one knew if it would ever dock with life still on it.

Perhaps Noah and all the animals thought they were forgotten in the ark, but God remembered Noah and all the beasts that were with him. And in God's sad heart, for all the destruction on the earth, the flood gates of the sky were stopped up and the rain was held back. And the boat docked. But they were all too afraid to leave, for the waters had not yet subsided. And at the end of 40 days Noah opened the window for the first time, letting in a glimpse of air and sun, and tested the earth to see if it was safe. But it wasn't yet safe, and so they waited longer until the waters began to dry and the cover of the ark was removed. And God said to Noah, "come out!" And out they came and offered thanksgiving for life to God, and God was well pleased. And God made a promise to Noah and to you and to me that never again will the earth be doomed because of the sinfulness of humanity, never again will God destroy every living being. God did not forget Noah, his children, his animals, the earth that was created with such care, and God said, "I am sorry and I will never leave you."

Nothing changed about humankind, we still fight God's intentions and God's desire to be close to us, we still don't trust God and use God to justify bad intentions. Nothing changed about humanity or creation or waters or floods. What has changed is God. God has made a decision, as God's heart knows our own heart, as God's heart knows our own grief and longing, God made a decision and made a covenant with us, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth. Every time we

¹ Brueggeman, Walter. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Genesis*. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982). 77

see a rainbow, God is reminding God's self of this great covenant, and we are reminded of the promises made to us and our ability to change.

If God's heart can change, as it did in the story of the flood and later in the sacrifice of Isaac, our hearts can change too. If God can look God's self in the face and turn around, then we can look ourselves in the face as well and confront the ghosts that are haunting us, breaking free of the shackles that are holding us hostage, keeping us from believing that we deserve a blessed life, one full of wholeness and at-peace-ness.

The question is **not** whether or not we are deserving, for either we are all deserving or none of us are deserving. The question is **not** "what bad thing did I do to deserve this?" The question is **not** what you do to prevent bad things from happening, by clipping your fingernails often enough or being proper enough or by following all "the" rules, whatever they may be. The answer to the question that we are **not** asking is that we are all worthy because of God's covenant, because God's love for us is so deep and wide that God holds empathy with us and cries with us gives us a second and a third and a fourth chance and loves us still.

The August Wilson play, *Gem of the Ocean* starring Phylicia Rashad and LisaGay Hamilton just recently closed on Broadway. I saw this play twice and could have seen it 15 more times, gathering new insight every time.

The setting is Pittsburgh, 1904, in the parlor of Aunt Ester's home. The people who lived in Aunt Ester's home found their way there in search of healing, in search of new life, in search of their souls to be washed. Wilson explores in this play the African-American psyche at the turn of the last century. Slavery is over, but living conditions aren't much improved. Former slaves make the trek north only to find a hostile white population and a harsh labor market. Aunt Ester and her small household offer solace, sanctuary, and counsel.²

The main character, Citizen, had recently committed a crime and participated in the precipitation of another man's death, deeply connected to the fabric of the economic basis of the city. Citizen came to Aunt Ester's home on a Saturday to get his soul washed, to "get right with himself." He knocked on the front door and another member of the household, Eli, answered it, saying that Aunt Ester only saw people on Tuesdays. So desperate to see Aunt Esther he climbed in through the second floor window, to get his soul washed. Aunt Ester found him in the parlor and fed him, gave him a warm bed to sleep in, and put him to work helping with the house and then began to listen. The repository of wisdom, she takes him on an interior journey into the collective memory of her people and of his history. Citizen admitted that he had done something and needed his soul washed, a simple task in his mind. And Aunt Ester kept telling him, "you are on a journey, do you know you are on a journey? Life is a journey!"

During the second act Aunt Ester asked Citizen if he was ready to get his soul washed, and he replied in the affirmative. They then would have to go the City of Bones. The whole house got ready to make a journey to the City of Bones, where the ancestors and all who have died reside. To prepare the men philosophized together, the women gathered the space, and not knowing what the City of Bones was, Citizen took a bath and put on his best clothes and was sent out to find two pennies. One of the men gave him a link from his chain used to keep him captive during slavery, the chains from which he broke out into freedom. Aunt Ester gave him a small paper boat which she called the "Gem of the Ocean" and told him to hold on to this boat, regardless of what happens, that boat is his salvation. We later learn that this paper boat was the deed for her sale as a slave, a deed that had no binding use any longer.

² http://www.backstage.com/backstage/columns/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1000737101.

And so Aunt Ester and her household took Citizen on a journey, to the City of Bones. Through prayer, song, and meditation the stage turned into a giant ship, and on the journey they went. They rocked back and forth and the waves got stronger and sharper, the colors changing all around. Aunt Ester asked what Citizen saw and he was scared, seeing faces. Aunt Ester asked who he saw, and sure enough it was the man for whose death he was partly responsible. He was instructed to give the man the pennies for his passage and to confront him with his regret and grief. He had to confront his history and the only thing keeping him grounded was the chain link and the paper boat, the link that was broken from bondage and the boat that was liberated. He couldn't hold himself up very well and too scared of the ancestors around him, not sure if he wanted to be on this boat ride, this journey, threw that paper boat on the ground. And he fell then to the ground, with chains then holding him down. And then the worst of the journey to the city of bones came. The chains kept him captive, and he fought and fought and fought to get out of those chains, he was whipped and he was brutalized. And the boat was just right next to him, teasing him, waiting for him to pick it up.

You know, we try and throw God on the ground, just like the paper boat, because our journey with God, the deep relationship we are called into with God can be painful and confusing, and we aren't sure if we really want to be on it sometimes. We think sometimes that it could be easier without God. but God is right next to us, waiting for us to pick God up in our lives. When we try and get out of our relationship with God because it calls us into too great of humility and honesty, when we try and throw God on the ground, God still comes after us, pursuing us, loving us still.

Citizen, after his first journey to the City of Bones, after he began to face his ghosts and his history, that which he was most afraid of, Aunt Ester told him, "now, Citizen, NOW you can live your life! Now your life begins!"

All we have to do is follow. All we have to do is identify that which is keeping us chained down and fight our way out of the chains, leaving them behind as a pile on the floor. And that fighting our way out of our chains is not easy work, it is a struggle of a lifetime. It is a process of confronting and sitting with our history, as a nation, as a church, as individuals. It is a process of examining our ghosts and our patterns and that which we are most afraid of.

Jesus commands us to follow him, "follow me," he says to Simon and Andrew and James and John. Jesus doesn't ask us whether we deserve it or not. He doesn't ask us if we have been good boys and girls. He just tells us to follow. And then he makes a promise, "I will make you fish for people." Jesus promises us that we are a part of God's saving work with humanity, as promised at the time of Noah. "Come on a journey," is Jesus' promise, a journey with new life. No one knows what this journey is going to be like. It is a miracle that the fishermen leave behind their nets and follow, as it is a miracle when we can leave behind all that our nets contain and follow.³

Life is a journey. What is your bondage, what are you most afraid of confronting, and would it be that scary if you could confront it? God made us a promise and God asks us to follow. God gives us a second and a third chance and a fourth chance. God is calling us, Jesus is urging us, the Spirit is prodding us, TRUST, I am here to hold you. Leave your nets and follow me! AMEN

³ Boring, M Eugene. *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes: Volume VIII: New Testament Articles Matthew, Mark.* (Nashville: Abingdon Press), 169.