

The Gift of Surrender

Sermon 59 | Greystone Baptist Church | May 10, 2020

Isaiah 6: 1-13

This time of year temperatures are on the rise, sunny days stretch into humid evenings, and Memorial Day draws near. People are starting to wonder if pools and beaches are going to open up like they normally would, and many of us might be ready to get back into the water.

Now is the time to brush up on our swimming skills, to remind ourselves what it feels like to be surrounded by water, and to prepare once again for the weightless feeling of floating on our backs as we gaze up at the sky, untouched by the stress of the world, and unmoored from all that holds us back.

Ahh, the warm days of summer couldn't come soon enough this year.

I've never been much good at floating in the water. It's one of the reasons swimming lessons didn't work out too well for me. Most swim instructors, I've found, insist that you learn how to float before you can learn how to swim. "Everyone can, and should, learn how to float in water," they say. "Knowing how to float can save your life... It may seem daunting, or downright impossible, but the first thing you have to do is believe that you can float."¹

Maybe that's just it. Maybe I never could believe that I could float. That would certainly be consistent with the way my body would tend to flail around in the pool anytime I was supposed to just lean back and trust that the water would indeed hold me up. I could trust it for a moment, but before too long I would feel one part of my body or another begin to sink and then the rest would kick into high gear flopping and squirming, anything to try to find the bottom of the pool so I could once again stand on my own feet. Maybe my problem is that I never figured out how to trust the water.

This is probably a sign of some sort of control issue. On the land I can control where I go and how I get there. I can count on having the air I need available to breathe into my lungs. I don't have to worry about currents or getting stuck in the deep end, falling off the edge, or not being able to determine which way is up. I am confident and in control if I stay put on dry land. But the minute I find myself surrounded by water, insecurity seeps in and I feel that control slip away. In the water, I begin to recognize just how powerless I am.

In her book, *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope*, Joan Chittister writes, "Powerlessness strips away all pretenses and renders us human... It is such a frightening place in which to find ourselves because it requires that we spend the rest of our lives making sure that underneath all the pomp and all the protocol of our public selves there really is something left to save. Otherwise we run the risk of never really coming to be a

¹ <https://www.swimoutlet.com/guides/how-to-float-for-swimming> retrieved 5.7.2020.

person at all until we have lost all the things that until this time have substituted for the self... Powerlessness... cleaves like a barnacle to the myth of control.”² So we avoid situations that make us feel powerless as much as we can. But sooner or later, those moments come.

Moments when life happens and there’s nothing we can do to stop it. Moments when the pandemic comes and the stock market crashes, when the diagnosis isn’t what we hoped for, when our loved ones pass away, when the job ends or when income slows, when friendships are strained, when our spirits are broken...

In moments like these, we come to terms with our own humanity, our loss of control, our powerlessness in the face of all that threatens life as we knew it. In times like these we begin to feel like we’re being asked to learn how to float, but all we know how to do is sink.

In times like these many of us turn to the Bible, looking for a word of hope and promise, a word from God assuring us that we can make it through whatever comes our way. When we go looking for this assurance, we often look to the heroes of our faith like Abraham and Moses... like Ruth and Mary... like Peter and Paul... patriarchs and matriarchs of faith whose lives testify to the goodness of God and the ability to keep the faith no matter what comes our way.

At times, these stories amplify our insecurities, leading us to say... “Well I’m no Abraham.” “I’m no Mary.” I am not as righteous or holy or faithful as they were. Or worse, maybe we resign ourselves to the conclusion that God is no longer in the business of making miracles happen.

The doubt creeps in and we’re left to struggle with our own powerlessness.

It feels like being tossed in the deep end of the pool and being told to lay still, lean back, trust that the water will hold you.

Meanwhile, everything within us is questioning: “Maybe I’m not meant to float.”

Our self-doubt creeps in and makes us sound like the prophet Isaiah saying,

“Woe is me, for I am lost,
I am a man of unclean lips...” (6:5a)
I am not worthy of this life, this calling, this ministry...

Even still the Lord calls and Isaiah comes around, uttering those famous words: “Here I am, Lord, send me.”

Often we remember this story as a powerful recognition of call and acceptance. We layer over the texts our own ideas about how glorious it must have been on that day when

² Joan Chittister. *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope*. 2003. p 55.

Isaiah entered the Temple and surrounded by celestial beings heard an undeniable call and after a supernatural encounter with the seraphs he says “Yes! Send me! I’ll do whatever you ask, Lord.” And in those same hopeful memories we like to imagine that everything worked out well for the prophet and his people after this sacred moment in the temple.

If we look closely at the scripture, we find the story to be a little different than we might recall. The calling of Isaiah is actually a recommissioning or a recommitment of the prophet to his God-given vocation. After all, we are already in chapter 6, and he has already spoken many prophetic words to the Israelites and their king Uzziah. Isaiah has already accepted God’s call on his life.

This moment, it seems, is a renewal of that original calling. And it doesn’t necessarily happen in the simplest of times. Chapter 6 begins with the declaration, “In the year that King Uzziah died.” These words might mean very little to us as modern readers but these are words that signaled major change for Isaiah and his people. The death of a King ushered in seasons of vulnerability and instability as a new King claimed the throne and began to rule. These moments of political transition were often marked by violence, rebellion, and unrest.

To make matters worse, Isaiah already knew that his messages from God would not be well received, he’d been warning the people, during Uzziah’s reign, to repent and change their ways. To care for the poor and tend to the vulnerable, living for justice and righteousness. But holy words seemed to fall on closed ears.

The death of the King would have been a great opportunity for the prophet to resign his calling, but here, in the aftermath of death and in the midst of great change, God calls him to remain. Isaiah tries to claim that there’s nothing he can do “Woe to me!” he cries out to God, “for I am lost.” There’s nothing I can do here.

Now *there’s* a biblical character we can relate to!

Here in this text, Isaiah is standing in the Temple, caught between the death of the King and the spiritual death of the people. He is powerless to change any of his circumstances and he is ready to give up... to throw in the towel and resign as prophet of Israel. “Woe to me! I am lost.”

But just as he is ready to give into his own powerlessness, he receives the gift of surrender.

For Isaiah, surrender meant a renewal of calling, a recommissioning of his life as the seraphs touched his lips with a hot coal signaling that he would once again speak God’s words for the people. Surrender meant letting go of the idea that he could do this task on his own... but rather beginning to trust that God might speak through him.

Surrender is a faithful act of letting things go, so that God can let them be.

“There are times to let a thing go.” Chittister writes, “There is a time to put a thing down, however unresolved, however baffling, however wrong, however unjust it may be. There are some things in life that cannot be changed, however intent we are to change them. There is a time to let surrender take over so that the past does not consume the present, so that new life can come, so that joy has a chance to surprise us again.”³

In this season, we are coming to terms with our own powerlessness. Rapid change has been forced upon all of us, causing us to re-structure our lives, re-think our patterns of living in community, and re-imagine our futures. There are many losses to grieve, but there is also a gift of holy surrender, waiting to be claimed.

No one knows what lies ahead. But we can trust in the one who holds us now and who will guide us every step of the way.

Perhaps the gift of surrender is a bit like learning how to float. At first we may be tempted to flail our limbs and search for dry ground on which to place our feet. But in times like this, when there seems to be no ground in sight, maybe we just need to learn how to float.

In her poem called *The Avowal*, Denise Levertov describes this act of holy surrender like this:

As swimmers dare
to lie face to the sky
and water bears them,
and air sustains them,
so I would learn to attain
freefall, and float
into Creator Spirit’s deep embrace,
knowing no effort earns
that all-surrounding grace.⁴

In times like these, maybe we all need to faithfully lean into our Creator’s deep embrace. Surrendering the ways of our past, leaning back, and trusting our futures to God who – like the water – will indeed hold us up, carry us forward, and perhaps even surprise us with the joy of New Creation.

May it be so.

³ Chittister, 60.

⁴ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/789046-the-avowal-as-swimmers-dare-to-lie-face-to-the> retrieved 5.9.2020