

Bible Study – Session 1
Ocean Sunday



OCEAN DEPTHS AND DELIGHTS

Earth Reading: Job 38.1-18

BEGINNING

In this study we focus on the ocean, the world of deep waters and hidden surprises that cover 2/3rds of our planet. We listen for the voices of the ocean rippling with waves and raging like a beast. But we also listen to voices of the ocean as it responds to intimate interactions with God.

Are you a sea person? Do you have a sense of excitement when you plunge into the ocean? Or are the deep sea waters a fearsome sight? Are you fascinated by the millions of hidden species living deep in the ocean? Is the ocean an expression of infinity, the deep mystery of God's presence?

Are you familiar with what the Bible says about the ocean and its origins? In the studies that follow you are invited to identify with the ocean and get a sense of the unique way the seas are portrayed in a selection of key texts.

Background

In preparation for a close reading of Job 38.1-18, it is helpful to first consider two other portraits of the Earth and the depths of the ocean so that the stark difference and delight of the account can be appreciated.

Genesis 1.1-10 portrays the birth of Earth. (For a detailed discussion of this text see the Bible Study for *Planet Earth Sunday*). The story begins with Earth waiting in the deep dark waters that existed in the beginning (Gen. 1.2). The image suggests a foetus in a womb.

On the third day, God calls the waters to separate, like the bursting of the waters in a womb. Then God says: 'Let Earth appear!' God does not say 'Let there be Earth.' Earth is already in the primal womb waiting. Earth then comes forth from the waters and appears. Earth is seen. Earth is born and comes to life with vegetation.

What role do the ocean waters play in this story? How would the waters respond to this part of the creation story?

Psalms 104 has a totally different picture of the way Earth and the waters are first associated. Earth is first fixed on its foundations, as if it were a building of some kind (Ps. 104.5). Then God covers all of Earth with the deep ocean waters. The waters reach high over all the mountains as in the flood story.

Then God talks to the high rising waters and commands them to flow back down the valleys to the places appointed for them. Their boundaries are fixed by the shores and their limits set by God's design. Earth is safe while the seas remain in place.

What do you think is implied by God giving personal commands to the ocean? Is ocean more than just water? How would the waters respond to God in this version of the creation story?

EXPLORING THE TEXT

Read Job 38.1-2

After Job's seemingly endless cries to God about the injustice done to him, God answers by taking Job on tour of the cosmos. He opens by challenging Job not to obscure the 'design' of the universe. Throughout the chapter, God explores with Job the design of numerous domains of the cosmos. Each domain has evidence of the laws or wisdom that God has implanted in that domain so that it functions as intended.

The technical word for this inner character of a domain is its 'way'. Each domain or part of creation has its 'way' or 'law', that inner code which governs how it functions.

Read Job 38.4-7

We noted about that in Genesis One the beginning of Earth is portrayed in terms of the birth of Earth from the primal waters. In Psalm 104, Earth is covered with waters before they are assigned to their place. In Job 38 the images are quite different.

The origins of Earth are portrayed as the meticulous construction of an edifice. The first stage is the fixing of the foundations. Then follows a detailed measurement of the various components of the building. Finally the cornerstone is fixed in place and there is a celestial celebration. The heavenly beings sing for joy. The design of Earth corresponds to the construction of a major building, an artifice of the master builder, celebrated by the heavens.

Discuss: What insights about the nature of Earth do you discern in this image of the origin of Earth? What is the significance of the celestial beings celebrating the erection of Earth? What is God's relationship to Earth in this imagery?

Read Job 38.8-11

The image of the ocean in this passage is in stark contrast to what we might have expected from other parts of the Scriptures. The Hebrew word for sea is Yam, a name that referred to the god of chaos in ancient Canaan. In this passage, however, sea a baby that bursts from the womb, just as Earth emerges from water in the birth story of Genesis 1 (Gen. 1.9-10).

The image of sea as a newborn infant continues as God wraps the sea in cloths of cloud and darkness. Sea is first of all enveloped with 'clothing'. Then God places a structure around sea—much like a playpen—to contain the child. Finally the infant sea is given a word of warning from its divine parent: You can go so far and no further!

The ocean may be feared as a raging deity with 'proud waves,' but in the hands of God it is like a child. As part of God's design, the sea too has laws and limits which govern its behaviour.

Some passages suggest even more delightful ways in which God is linked with the sea. Psalm 104.26 speaks of the ocean as the playground where God 'plays' games with Leviathan, the great sea monster. In the sea, Leviathan is like God's beach-ball!

Discuss: How do you think sea might respond when viewed by God as an infant or a playground? What kind of special relationship seems to exist here between God and sea?

Read Job 38.12-18

God continues to take Job on a tour of the cosmos in the verses that follow. First God asks Job whether he implanted innate wisdom in the down, its knowledge of how rise each morning and expose the wicked in their hiding places.

Then God takes Job back to explore the design of the sea. Perhaps Job has a limited understanding after the earlier image of sea as a baby in its pen. For there is a dimension to sea that is enveloped in mystery, a mystery reflected in the word 'deep'. The deep of the sea is a realm Job has not plumbed, a world of amazing springs and torrents hidden below.

That deep is a mystery comparable to the deep of death, another world deep below closed in by gates and dominated by darkness. A similar mystery is the vastness of Earth rising from the ocean waters.

In short, this chapter of Job is about all the distinct yet mysterious 'ways' that govern each domain in the design of God's universe. In that design, the oceans, the springs below and the torrents of rain above form a mysterious complex of interdependent forces, each with its role to play, each with its distinctive 'way' in the design of the cosmos.

Discuss: We have all, at some point, viewed the clouds and the images they seem to form in passing. Do we realise that those clouds are an extension of the sea? Or as Job puts it, the garment for sea? How should we relate to the ocean? Does this text suggest that the sea is more than a source of fish or a passage for navigation? What is the voice of sea you hear from these passages?

CONSCIOUS OF THE CRISIS

It is relatively easy for us to ignore the condition of the sea. It seems so vast and distant. How can a few people on land create a genuine problem for the sea?

John Kunich in his book *Killing our Oceans* highlights first of all the discovery of vast new kingdoms of creatures in what he calls the 'hot spots' of teeming life forms deep in the ocean. We have only begun to grasp the magnitude of the life forms that inhabit the seas.

Sad to say, we have only begun to grasp the destructive ways in which human activities have begun to affect the sea and its complex ecosystems. We are aware of how many coral reefs, which are equivalent to the rain forest on land, have been bleached and killed by toxins and other pollutants. But Kunich demonstrates that

We human beings are almost entirely responsible for the massive die-off in our oceans, so why should we not be responsible about it? It is the shop-worn shopkeeper's motto writ large: "You break it, you buy it!" All over the world we are 'breaking' the vast, ancient, but fragile structure of marine life, and if we do not pay to undo the damage, it will only spread and worsen. We have a moral duty to do all we can to halt and reverse the harm we are inflicting upon this most precious and least understood of natural treasures. (p. 23)

Kunich outlines some of the many ways we are killing our oceans from ocean dumping, discharge of materials, overfishing, introduction of invasive species and more. We may well argue that this crisis imposes more than a moral duty on us; it confronts us with a spiritual crisis. We are destroying one of the deep mysteries God has given us to explore, one of the domains of God's presence.

Even political leaders are now aware, through careful scientific studies, that global warming is causing the ocean level to rise at an alarming rate. We need to demand comparable studies of the ocean and find ways to reverse the killing of our oceans.

Discuss: What do you think we ought to do to raise awareness of the precarious state of our oceans? Is this more than a moral issue for you?

CONNECTING WITH CHRIST

Read Luke 5.1-11

Many of us like to think we have learned something of the art of fishing, whether in streams, lakes or the sea. Of course, modern boats have so-called fish finders that identify schools of fish below the boat and give those fishing a definite advantage. Simon Peter had no fish finder. He relied on knowing the 'way' of the fish, their feeding habits and their normal habitats.

After Jesus taught some people from Peter's boat, he suggested that Peter go fishing. Understandably Peter was surprised. After all, he had been fishing all night in his usual spots and there was nothing around. Jesus' request has a special catch: Put out into the deep water!'

The deep is the realm of mystery and wonder. The deep is what Job had been challenged to explore beneath the seas and in the world of the dead. The deep was the unknown. And it is precisely in that domain that the disciples catch a mass of fish. Jesus challenges them to move beyond their comfort zones, the known world and to explore the deep.

Peter's response is to fall at Jesus' knees and say: 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!'

How does Jesus respond? By giving Peter another challenge! He essentially tells Peter to stop feeling sorry for himself. Fish from the deep is the first challenge. There is an even bigger challenge; catching human beings with the new message I bring.

Just how massive and deep that message turns out to be is reflected in the epistle lesson of Ephesians 1.3-10. This Jesus is the Christ who not only brings his disciples face to face with the waters of the deep, but with the cosmic mysteries of redemption, forgiveness, wisdom and hope. For this Christ is destined to 'gather up' all things in the cosmos—the seas, the stars and the skies—and once again unite them according to God's plan.

Discuss: In the light of these texts, do you think Jesus has a special relationship with the sea? Does Christ come to heal our broken relationship with the seas as well as with God and each other? What voice might we hear from the ocean in response to Christ's coming?

CLOSING WITH PRAISE

Participants may wish to close by singing the following verse of Hymn 4 from *Habel Hymns Volume One*. The melody is Praise my Soul, the King of Heaven.

SONG OF THE WATERS

View anew the dark blue ocean,
Whales cavorting, spraying foam;
God at play with deep sea monsters,
Feeling very much at home.
Sing a song of laughing waters,
Pulsing through the veins of Earth.

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PRAYER

*Christ, the wisdom of God from the deep,
help us to understand the mystery of the ocean
and of your presence among us as Jesus, the fisherman,
and as Christ, the cosmic mystery
that unites all things in God. Amen*