

Ebb and Flow
Mark 1:4–11; John 3:22–30
Sunday, January 10, 2021

I want to start by letting you in on a secret. Although, it's not really a secret, because it's all around us. It's just something that we might not be aware of, but once we *see* it, we see it *everywhere*, and it has *huge* implications for our lives and our faith. The secret is *this*. It's called a Hoberman Sphere, and I found it years ago in a toy store. All it does it open and close, expand and contract. But its movement reflects the very essence of the universe.

Scientists talk about the universe as starting from a singular point and then *expanding*. But they also say that the universe will eventually begin to *contract*, with all things returning to a singular point. There was a French theologian named Pierre Teilhard de Chardin who refers to this as the *Omega Point*, when all things return to a final point of unification. So the universe itself goes through this motion of expansion and contraction.

We see this similar motion in the stars themselves. All stars are formed from collapsing clouds of gas and dust, and they live their lives in this constant tension of expansion and collapse. Eventually, stars expand until the core of the star collapses, which sheds outer layers of gas and other materials out into space, and the process begins all over again as new stars are formed. It's a constant process of expansion and contraction. It's this very process that *makes life possible*.

Think about your own body. Your heart is in a constant state of expansion and contraction. That's what pumps blood through your body. Your *lungs* reflect this motion, too, in the very act of breathing. As you breathe in, your lungs expand, and as you breathe out, they contract. Breathe in, breathe out; expansion and contraction. It is a constant motion within your body. In fact – I *love* this – there are some theologians and even Christian astrophysicists who talk about

the expansion and contraction of the *universe* as reflecting the very *breath* or *pulse* or *heartbeat* of *God*.

We see this same motion so many other places in the world around us. Sound and light both move in waves, this kind of pulsing, fluctuating cycle of peaks and troughs, expansion and contraction.

There is a sense in which we see it in the *seasons* that we experience. In Spring, things begin to come to life and grow. In Summer, they have reached the peak of their growth. In Fall, they begin to go dormant or die. And in Winter, they are dormant, only to start the whole cycle all over again. Growth and decline. Life and death. Expansion and contraction. It's like there's a pulse in the natural world.

And we especially see this motion in *water*. Light and sound move in waves. Heartbeats are depicted in waves (peaks and troughs). And *water* moves in waves. Think about standing at the edge of the ocean. The water comes forward, and then it recedes, over and over again. And within that ebb and flow, the tides rise and fall. It's this never-ending swell and contraction of water. It's the pulse, the heartbeat of life on earth, because without water, life is not possible.

And so it's no surprise that the foundational practice of our faith – baptism – involves water. Because without water, life is not possible. And the sacrament of baptism draws us in to a life of faith, uniting us with Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection. Death and resurrection, expansion and contraction. This is the rhythm of creation and our lives and our faith.

I've shared with you before that when I was first baptized (when I was 14), I had this surge of excitement and energy about my faith. And I remember as I knelt down on the steps before the baptismal font, my pastor was praying, and I had this had this feeling like, "Everything is about to change." And as the pastor reached out his hand to place the water on my head, I literally held my breath, thinking that once the water touches my head, I was going to *feel* different. I was going to be a different person; more holy. And then when it happened, I remember thinking, "That's it? Nothing happened. I feel exactly the same as I did before."

So I kind of went back to normal; went about living my life. But then three years later, I've shared with you before how my life was at a low point. I had gotten in some trouble, arrested for something I didn't do, and it felt like my whole life was falling apart. It was in the midst of that, that I had this experience of the presence of God. I knew that God was *real*, and that God was *with* me, and that God *loved* me. And that experience led to a surge in my faith, this energy and excitement and passion, a vibrant prayer life. It led me to seminary. It led me to become a pastor.

But then several years after that, Jen and I lost our first child. And then another child a year later. And it was like everything that I had believed or been taught about God and life and faith didn't *work* anymore. It didn't *fit* anymore. I went through this process of having to rebuild my faith, piece by piece. And that eventually led me to a new and vibrant faith that was *alive* again, and I had that renewed sense of God's presence and love in my life.

But then *that* eventually faded over time, and I had to find *new* ways of connecting with God. I would go through periods of doubt and struggle, followed by periods of renewed energy and passion and faith.

I remember once, talking with a man whom I had baptized as an adult. He didn't grow up in the church; came to faith later in life. And when I baptized him, he was so on fire; so passionate about God and his faith. Eventually, his job took him elsewhere, so he moved away, and we didn't see each other for a few years. But then we talked one day, and he told me how his faith just felt *flat*. And he kept saying, "I remember how it was when I first became a Christian. I just want to feel like *that* again. I want to feel that energy and passion. I feel like I'm not as good of a Christian as I used to be."

I think there's a sense in which a lot of us can relate to that. There are times in our lives when we are engaged and connected, and we have this energy and passion, and we feel connected to God. And then there are times when we have doubts or struggles and we feel flat and disconnected or ambivalent or just *tired*. And when we experience those moments, there's a part of us that can feel like, "What's wrong with me? Why can't I feel the way I *used* to? Am I unfaithful? Am I a bad Christian?"

And what we need to remember is *this*. That the *universe* is in a constant state of expansion and contraction. Our *bodies* are in a constant state of expansion and contraction. The *world around us* is in a constant state of expansion and contraction. And our *faith* is in a constant state of expansion and contraction. Our faith is like a heartbeat. There are peaks and troughs. It's like the ocean. It ebbs and flows. It doesn't mean that we're unfaithful or bad Christians. It *pulses*, and that's how we know that we're *alive*.

Sometimes we're really good about reading scripture and praying and serving and living our lives in ways that trust God, and we feel a real *connection* to God. We feel like our lives and our

faith are *expanding*. And sometimes those things are a little harder. It's harder to trust or to pray. We don't feel that *connection* to God. We feel like our faith is getting *smaller*, *contracting*. But this is just the natural rhythm of life. We see it *everywhere* around us, so why shouldn't we expect to see it in our faith?

Look at this story of John the Baptist. He has baptized Jesus, and Jesus goes off to start his ministry. One day, John's disciples come to him and say, "Hey, that guy you baptized, Jesus? He's over there on the other side of the river, and *he's* baptizing people! Everyone is going to *him*! He's taking people away from you! What should we do?" And John says, "I told you that I wasn't the Messiah; that I had just been sent ahead of him to pave the way for him. For this reason, he must increase, but I must decrease." He must *expand*, and I must *contract*.

John understood this rhythm and his place in it. He understood that when he *contracts*, that is when Christ *increases*. When he *ebbs*, Christ *flows*.

And it is no different in *our* lives and faith. When we struggle and doubt and we feel like our faith is getting smaller, those moments of contraction are precisely the moments when Christ can *increase* in us. Those are the moments when we *need* Christ the most, when we've come to the end of our rope and we can't rely on our own strength and ability and faith anymore. Those are the moments when we depend on the strength and faith of *Christ* to do more in us than we are able to do on our own. As *we* contract, we make room for *Christ* to expand. As *we decrease*, we make room for Christ to *increase*. As *we ebb*, we make room for Christ to *flow*. That is not a failure or lack of faith on our part. It is the natural rhythm of life and faith. It is our spiritual pulse. And it simply means that we're alive.

After what happened at our nation's capital this past Wednesday, I had *thought* that I would end this sermon with some sort of connection to that. But I'll be honest with you, I'm just not there yet. That's one of the challenges of recording these services ahead of time. It's only Thursday afternoon for me right now – 24 hours later – and I'm still processing everything. I don't know how to make sense out of this yet or put words to it. I've really been struggling with that (and I'm actually late for dinner right now, because this has taken longer than I thought).

But I kept thinking, "I need to say something about this. Am I a bad pastor if I *don't* talk about this or help us make sense of this?" But now I realize, no, it doesn't make me a bad pastor. It just means that, like a lot of us, I'm ebbing right now. I'm in a trough. I'm contracting. I'm riding that wave, and that's something we need to give ourselves (and each other) permission to do.

I *do* know that, as the baptized people of God in Jesus Christ, our calling is never to violence, but to peace and love. And we are called to love not just our friends and those we agree with. Christ also calls us to love our enemies, those with whom we *disagree*, and to act toward one another in ways that show patience and kindness and hope. Because we are all riding the same wave, even though we might be at different places on it.

Scripture promises us that when we do not have the words to say, the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness and intercedes with sighs too deep for words. So trusting in that promise, let us come to God in prayer, that the Spirit of Christ might increase in us and in this world.