

“Ocean Tides”  
July 17, 2022

Revelation 22:1-5

Watching young children is one of my favorite things to do at the beach. Especially when the surf is up and the waves are rolling into shore at a steady clip. Sometimes I try to imagine what it must be like for a two or three year old child to look out with wide eyes over the vast ocean. Waves that may only rise as the knees or waist of an adult look like tidal waves to a small child.

Have you ever sat for a time and watched a young child darting in and out of the ocean? The wave goes out and children do one of two things. Either they shuffle closer to the edge of the water as if they're trying to sneak up on the ocean and take a quick dip before the next wave comes. Or they scurry to the water's edge, giggling and shrieking, trying to splash around and create as much ruckus as they can until the next wave arrives.

And how often have you watched children dashing across the sand parallel to the shoreline? In wonderful, serpentine movements they weave their way up and down the sand like sandpipers. Scooting close to the water when the wave recedes and then scampering up to dry ground when the wave comes in. Leaving tiny footprints which linger on high ground but disappear instantaneously on the lower, wetter sand. I don't know if there's a name for this game, but the objective is to run as close as you can to the waves without getting your feet wet.

For young children, I imagine the ocean is one of the great practical mysteries in the world. So frightening and yet so enticing. So awesome and yet so alluring. So relentless and so unpredictable. Each wave repetitious and yet wonderfully unique in its own way. And each wave washing up countless treasures; shells, crabs, seaweed and other trinkets tiny enough to fit into a pair of small hands.

Even when we grow older, there is something about the ocean that still fascinates many of us. And maybe when we grow up we come to appreciate the ocean as much for what it represents as for what it is. Through adult eyes we look out over the ocean and feel a restless sense of adventure. And sometimes, if you are like me, you look out over the vast water as far as your eye can see and you wonder where the ocean ends on the other side. Way out beyond the edge of the horizon where the sky perches itself peacefully on top of the ocean's surface, there must be a distant shore where someone else's children are playing wave games up and down the sand.

When we are young children, we focus on the waves coming into the shore. We concentrate on their size and their speed and their sound. But as we age, I think we focus equally on the waves going away from the shore. Did you know that the words “tide” and “time” share a common root in the Indo-European language? **(1)** As such, the ebb and flow of the waves becomes a metaphor for the passing of time and a symbolic way we think about the events in our lives.

The ocean can illustrate stages in our lives. Our younger years...childhood, youth and young adulthood might be termed the “tide coming in years.” Then when we pass middle age and progress into our older years, we live in the “tide going out years.” And we realize in a palpable way which can be alarming or comforting or both, that we are closer to the end of our lives than we are to the beginning. The tide which always seemed to be coming in toward the shore during our early, invincible years becomes a tide which goes out and fades away as years go by...

Human beings spend a good deal of time on earth trying to find a place that looks and feels and smells and sounds like home. And if we are fortunate, you and I find such a place. A place where we can be accepted and loved unconditionally. A place where we feel safe and secure in a troubled world. A place which offers us rejuvenation through the gifts of healing and forgiveness and reflection.

Human beings also devote enormous energy cultivating relationships here on earth which enable us to feel at home. Family relationships, marriages, deep friendships and other committed, caring relationships where we can be affirmed for who we are. Where the other person knows our name by heart and we can pick up with them wherever and whenever we left off last.

The one home we don't talk about much is the home to which we will all journey in time. The home prepared for us by Jesus Christ. The home which will be our final resting place when we come to the end of our lifelong journeys. That home is the home we know by faith and in hope yet not be sight...our eternal home.

The tide or the time of life does indeed roll along, bearing all its children away, in the words of our opening hymn this morning. Moreover, from the moment we are born, the tide is constantly receding, taking us farther and farther away from the near shore and ever closer to the mysterious place on the distant shore where our worldly time will come to an end. Through all the years and the events and the stages in our lives, I think it's possible we spend as much time and energy in our lifetimes searching for an eternal home as we do searching for an earthly one.

Where do we go after we die? What will it look like when we get there? Will anyone be there to meet us? How will we spend our time, if there is any such thing as time in the world beyond this one? Is our life on earth merely a brief sojourn to prepare us for life in God's eternity? In our most curious and most desperate and most frightened moments, we invest a good deal of time and energy trying to convince ourselves that the life we know is not all there is. All the while trying to deny our own mortality. Or trying to comfort ourselves with the assurance that our next life will be filled with endless joy and no more sadness or struggle...

A number of you have probably seen the movie *Schindler's List*. Based on a true story and directed by Steven Spielberg, the film won the Academy Award as Best Picture back in 1993. If you haven't seen it, the film tells the story of Oskar Schindler, a German

businessman who saves as many Jewish men, women and children as he can from death in Nazi concentration camps.

By the end of World War II, Oskar Schindler spared the lives of over eleven hundred Jews. But the film doesn't merely tell the tale of the Jews who survived thanks to Schindler's efforts. It also tells the disturbing tale of millions of Jews who died at Auschwitz and other death camps. And it tells the tale of ruthless Nazi commanders whose disregard for the sanctity of human life numbed them to their atrocities.

Adding to its cinematic power, most of Schindler's List is filmed in black and white. Much like an old documentary. But throughout the movie in a number of crowd scenes...when people are walking around or working outside or in scenes where children are playing and hiding together, there is a single, ever-present touch of color. The color appears as a tiny and subtle aberration in the midst of the dominant black and white. Yet the color is unmistakable. Again and again throughout the movie, there is a little girl wearing a red dress. (2)

Near the end of the movie, there is a bleak black and white panorama of hundreds of Jewish bodies stacked high in the wake of a Nazi massacre. In and of themselves, the bodies are nondescript. But buried in those bodies, almost out of sight, is a tiny touch of color. A patch of the little girl's red dress.

As I think about tides. As I watch children running in and out of the waves. As I look out over the ocean to the place where the horizon perches peacefully atop the water and imagine where the distant shore begins. As I contemplate the time of my life, coming in and going out, ever receding as the years progress. When I think about where my lifelong journey is taking me and what God's home might feel like at the end.

When I think about eternal life, I imagine a little girl in a red dress. In this dark, black and white and gray world in which we live, where so much seems dull and routine and so much time seems wasted and so much of the world's beauty goes unrecognized and unappreciated, I still believe that God's sees each of us as a child in red.

And when we have died and found our way to the distant shore, God never loses sight of us. In God's eyes, each one of us is unmistakable. A unique patch of color which is God's eternal promise to us that our life never ends. Like a precious and beautiful red dress, that eternal home toward which we are traveling will be the sacred, life-giving fulfillment of our search for home here on earth.

The writer of the Book of Revelation put God's eternal vision in these words:

"Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb, through the middle of the street of the city... Nothing accursed will be found there anymore. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and God's servants will worship God; they will see God's face and God's name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of

lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.”  
Amen.

- (1) Frederick Buechner, *The Longing for Home: Recollections and Reflections*  
(New York, NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996) pg. 1.
- (2) Ibid., pgs. 148,149.

