

“What We Cast Off” and “What We Carry”
January 5th, 2020
Rev. Laurel Gray

Reflection: What We Cast Off

There is a ritual called tashlich that is part of Rosh Hashanah, which marks the Jewish new year in the fall. In the days leading up to Rosh Hashanah, people prepare for the new year by making amends with the past year.

It is a time of letting go of the year past, of offering forgiveness, of asking for forgiveness. It's a time for letting go of our hurts and our mistakes so that we can move forward into a new year.

Tashlich literally means to cast off.

And in the tashlich ritual a community goes to the water, maybe it's a stream, or a pond, or the ocean, and they take little pieces of bread and toss them into the water. With each piece they release something that's been causing them pain, and they let the water take it away.

Several years ago, I did this with a friend of mine when I was living in San Francisco. It was Rosh Hashanah and we decided to go for a walk on the beach to look at the stars. The air was cool and smelled of salt. It was all quiet except for the sound of the waves.

As we stood there looking out at the ocean and the night sky, talking about the things that were heavy on our hearts, we decided to do tashlich.

But we hadn't brought any bread.

We looked around and noticed that there were sand dollars all along the water. Those flat round, white crustaceans, sort of like starfish, but smooth and circular.

And so we began picking up sand dollars and casting them back into the ocean.

And as we did this we spoke out to the stars and the ocean and each other, naming the things we needed to let go. One by one we released our burdens into the water, holding each other in community as we found our way.

Today, as we look towards this new year, we will be doing a version of this.

As you came in this morning, you should have gotten a circle of white paper. These are our sand dollars for this morning.

If you didn't get one on your way in, or would like a few more, raise your hand when Cassie comes around with the basket. There are pencils in the pews if you need one.

I invite you to write or draw your burdens on these pieces of paper – whatever you want to cast off and let go of as you enter this new year. Or just hold the paper in your hand as you think about the things you need to let go.

And when you are ready, you're invited to bring them forward and place them in the jar of water at the front of the sanctuary. The paper will dissolve in the water. And if you were here on our first Sunday, you'll remember we blended water from the places we loved during our water communion service. Some of that blessed water is in this jar, ready to receive your hurts and worries and regrets.

Take a few minutes to reflect, and then come up as you're ready.

Reflection: What We Carry

We have done some letting go this morning. Hopefully you have found some ease in your heart, a little lightness in your spirit. As we look towards this new year, I also invite you to think about your hopes, the things you are looking forward to, the things you wish will happen.

And I invite you to think about the joy you've experienced in this last year.

Were there moments when your heart felt full of love?

What about moments when you laughed so hard you couldn't catch your breath?

Where there times when something beautiful or kind happened unexpectedly?

As you go into this new year, what joy or love are you bringing with you?

And what do you hope for in this next year?

Birthdays are a kind of new year for each of us. And one of my favorite things about birthdays is birthday candles. You may have wondered why you received one on your way in this morning.

I love birthday candles because they usually come with cake, but even more so I love birthday candles because they feel joyful and hopeful. Birthday candles are for making wishes, for looking forward to the year ahead.

That Rosh Hashanah, when my friend and I threw sand dollars into the ocean, it started with an apple cake. Jews customarily eat apples and honey on Rosh Hashanah to represent the hope for a sweet new year. And a lot of people make apple cake as part of this.

Well I had made an apple cake that Rosh Hashanah in San Francisco.

A group of us had gathered to celebrate the Jewish new year, and somehow we rather spontaneously decided to light birthday candles on our apple cake and sing Happy Birthday to the world to represent the new year. I don't remember why or how, but I remember how sweet it was, how joyful it was to hold the light together and welcome a new year.

And so today I invite you to make a wish for the year ahead, to write down the hopes, the joys, the loves that you are carrying into this New Year. Take a few minutes to reflect and write or draw on the card tied to your birthday candle, and then take your wishes out into the world with you when you leave here.