

Trap Day, Monhegan
October 1, 2021

Morning sun brightens the distant summit of Mount Battie,
Sparkles on whitecaps rolling in from the northwest,
Seven lobster boats, traps loaded, idle in Monhegan Harbor,
Shaded yet from sun just now touching the high fir and spruce
On the island's high ground.

When the light has come up just enough to see,
Ka-boom!
A dock-mounted cannon roars,
Boats power up, head from harbor shelter to open water.
The new lobstering season has begun.

I stand among a gathering of islanders, about to begin their work day at other tasks,
lobstering families, old and young; a handful of visitors, like myself.
We stand at harbors edge, waiting for the send-off, in that final hour of darkness.
Some in the small crowd clap, some cheer.
Others, though, hold silence, eyes following the course of those few boats, growing smaller,
almost fragile, against the vastness of that sea.
Their thoughts, those silent ones? Winter to come? Size of the catch to come?
The rumbling craft roll and pitch in the undulating waters,
Drop the first traps, motor out of sight.

Five months have come and gone since the last trap was hauled.
How shall this season go?
The lobsters, they say, are heading north, and farther out to sea.
There are far fewer of them.
For the Gulf of Maine waters are quickly warming, too much so for the liking of lobsters.
Here, off Monhegan, humankind has harvested lobster for time immemorial.
For all we know, the lives of humankind and of lobsters have been intertwined for
millennia.

I return early the following morning, first day when lobstering men and women
Check their traps, pulling the first of the catch from the traps set the day before.
Piles of line and buoys, a few spare traps, and such, stand about the dock.
Repairs and replacements, may be in order at anytime – even on day two of the season.

A boat approaches from the island's north side,
Powers down as it passes through the harbor, pulls up, idles.
I see a small form, a large form, and a trap sliding into the water.
The boat motors back to the dock, pulls in to the walkway.
A man is at the helm, a woman, the stern worker, minds the gap between boat and dock.
A girl of about 8 years of age, high rubber boots reaching up to her knees,
Steps out as from nearly under their feet,

Up onto the dock she goes,
Through the small crowd with hardly a look,
Makes a determined way on the path up the hill toward the village,
And, presumably, toward home.

Her lobstering parents, the two of them, have taken her out with them
For the first hours of this lobstering day,
To be with them as they work,
To toss, with assistance, her own trap into the sea;
To see and touch and smell and hear and taste the sea her mother and father will know
morning after early morning for the many months to come.

This is what we do.
This is how we earn a living.
Here is the sea.
Here this island, the waters around, our home and the home of the creatures of the sea,
lobster among them;
We and they, lives intertwined.
This is how it is.
We want you to know this intertwining.
And now you do.

The girl reaches the top of the rise above the harbor,
Disappears from view.

The waters are warming.
The waters are warming.

Rev. Doug Dunlap is Editor of the monthly Spiritual Reflection Series. He is a member of the New Sharon Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, and co-founder of The Small Church Story Project.