

SERMON: “Sailing Stories in the Bible: Jonah’s Sea Story.”

Rev. Geoff Ross St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Brampton, Sunday, July 30, 2017

[Adlib: Summer=sailing/16/summer/races/Sailing stories]

I know what you’re thinking: sermons are supposed to be about good and evil – about Jesus and God – not about seemingly frivolous ‘sailing stories’. But the Bible, among other things, is a collection of stories that are made up of many repeating themes and motifs, symbols and images, and sailing stories – or more accurately, sea stories – fall into this category. These stories also share a common outline: that God is present in human history, and that it is only through God’s grace that we are saved. To illustrate this I selected verses from Psalm 107 (printed in the insert) as the series’ theme. Within these few verses we can see the pattern that establishes the progression from self-reliance to fear to submission to belief and thanksgiving. Let us listen to the first verse:

*“Some went down to the sea in ships,
Doing business on the mighty waters;
They saw the deeds of the Lord,
wondrous works in the deep.”*

Sailing has a Zen like quality – it strips away all of the clutter and demands that we pay attention to the shifting wind and water and to the pull of the sails: it frees me like no other thing I know or do because it is honest – and it does not tolerate mistakes well. As anyone who sails knows, sailing tests our abilities by pitting us against nature – it requires us to humble ourselves by reminding us that we’re not in total control, that we’re not a part from nature but are a part of it, and that we must work with it if we are to get where we want to go. But sometimes the weather starts getting rough – and the tiny ship gets tossed ... as we hear as we continue with the Psalm:

*“For God commanded and raised the stormy wind,
Which lifted up the waves of the sea.
They mounted up to heaven,
they went down to the depths;
Their courage melted away in their calamity;
They reeled and staggered like drunkards,
and were at their wits end.”*

Sailing is dangerous. Think about it: humans set out across a ever changing liquid surface of an environment where we cannot survive in pitching and rolling vessels propelled by a contraption rigged to catch wind at angles in order to move the craft forward. Interestingly – but not surprising – is the fact that most sailors don’t like the water; most don’t even know how to swim. Water is the enemy – it is the great unknown, the place where only God is in charge. And this brings us to Jonah.

To recap: Jonah heard God’s call for him to go to Nineveh to preach a message of repentance and forgiveness, but out of his pride and stubbornness he decides to run as

far away as he possibly could to escape his duty; something we all do. That's the context of the story – the reason why we're tossing about at sea with the waves and wind rising with every mile we put between God and us: Jonah was a fugitive from God and God was getting angry.

Amid the whistling wind, flapping sails, the whipping of the ropes, and the stinging rain – amid the rising panic and fear, their confusion and helplessness – the sailors start to frantically throw the cargo overboard as they take on water. We hear their shouts above the wind as their anxiety rises as their ship sinks. After exhausting all options the sailors fall back on their superstition: they draw lots to determine who among them is the cause of the storm that seems bent on destroying them; they wake up Jonah and command him to pray to God – and it works.

So much of life is like this – after all the images of sailing, the boat, and the storm are metaphors for life and chaos: we chart a course, fix our mark, sheet in but sometimes we're tossed about by forces we cannot control, we get overwhelmed and feel helpless. Like the sailors we try everything: we say it's bad luck, we blame someone else for our problems; only then do we turn to God for help. This is what they do in the Psalm:

*“Then in their trouble they cried to the Lord,
Who brought them out from their distress;
The Lord made the storm be still,
And the waves of the sea were hushed.
Then they were glad because they had quiet.”*

The arc of the Jonah story is simple: we have sailors who exist in a state of superstition, a storm rages and the helpless sailors cry out to God – making a movement toward faith and acceptance of God's supremacy, and the calm refuge of redemption after the storm. The power of the Book of Jonah is that despite Jonah's reluctance to preach God's message of repentance Jonah causes the repentance of not only the Ninevites but also a ship of Godless sailors. This is the power of God's saving grace.

In the Bible, water – in its many forms, even in its violent storms – signifies God's creative power. Physically/spiritually life cannot exist without water. But as we will see over this series, we also cannot exist – even on the water – without God's saving power that can overcome/calm the maelstroms of life. So, while Jonah's story ends in the desert of Nineveh – the end of this sea story, for those who come to believe in God, is the same: the blessing of the final line from the Psalm will be ours:

“And God brought them to their desired haven.”

This is the promise of a place prepared for us, of a place safe and welcoming – a harbor in the storm, a desired haven. Amen.