

SERMON: “Sailing Stories: Tempest of Faith.”

Rev. Geoff Ross: St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Brampton, Sunday, Aug 7, 2017

It had been an eventful day. Beside the Sea of Galilee He had spoken His first parables about the nature of God's kingdom, illustrating what was expected of those who would follow and believe in Him. It had been an eventful day filled with crowds, questions, demands, teaching and healing: and still the crowds pressed in on Him. It had been an eventful day and evening found Him tired and exhausted: weary, He decided to travel through the night across the lake; maybe then He could get some sleep. So He instructed His disciples to prepare a boat for the three-hour trip. Racing the light they set sail for the other shore in a fishing boat, taking Him just “as He was”. Once on board were told Jesus lay down in the stern of the boat, and quickly fell asleep.

And why not; the evening calm had settled upon the lake. Why not, after all He was with His trusted Disciples, most of them were sailors and fishermen. Why not let them take care of Him? But as the sun sets, clouds blot out the sky, the wind swept down from the mountains; roiling the water, churning up the shallow Sea, a tempest erupts and their tiny ship was tossed. The ropes lashed and sang while the sail strained and the mast shuddered under the assault as waves, whipped into fury by the howling winds, now threatened to engulf the boat. Wet and frightened the disciples, these hardy fishermen, now found their strength and skill dissolving away. Helpless in the grasp of the tempest, their hope failed them. In a moment, it seemed, the Sea would swallow them up.

Absorbed in their efforts to save themselves, they had forgotten that Jesus was on board. In their helplessness and despair they seek Him out. ‘Had Jesus forsaken them? Was He who had conquered disease powerless to help them? Was He unaware of their distress?’ Suddenly a flash of lightning splits the darkness, and they see Jesus sleeping. In amazement they cry out, “*Teacher, don't you care that we're about to drown?*” Despite the raging storm it is their cry that arouses Him. They look at Him and according to Matthew's account of this story, they cry, “*Lord, save us: we are perishing.*” “*S. O. S.; Save Our Souls.*” And Jesus responds.

Rising, and lifting His hand, Jesus says into the storm; “*Peace, be still.*” And the storm stops. The waves melt. The clouds roll away, the stars shine again. The boat, becalmed, is now quiet as the Sea. Turning to His disciples, Jesus asks, “*Why are you afraid? Don't you have any faith?*” But with the fury of the storm gone, with their fear forgotten, without hearing Jesus' words, the Disciples whisper, “*Who is this? Even the storm and sea obey Him?*” Friends, this is the heart of this sailing story: Jesus' calming of the storm is not merely a demonstration of His Divine power over nature, but is a redemptive act in which the chaotic forces of the “sea” are quelled and the Disciples are rescued from their fear and disorder despite themselves. This is the power of God's grace – God's saving Word **is** God's saving action: this is the Good News of God's love.

Throughout the Old Testament the sea symbolizes chaos and something to be feared. As the storm rages, from the anguish of the Disciples, we are meant to understand that their situation was desperate. This makes Jesus' sleep more revealing: He's the still center of the storm; there is no fear on His face, words, or heart because He has faith in God's love and power. Unlike the Disciples, His trust in God is complete/brings Him peace. The Good News of this sailing story is that God/Jesus is always with us/'on board'. Isaiah 57: 20-21 says that, "*The wicked are like the tossing sea, that cannot keep still.... There is no peace for the wicked.*" In other words, without Jesus, we are just like the disciples caught in the raging storm – there can be no word of peace to calm our souls.

And this is why this story is so important for us to hear today when so many of us feel buffeted by malevolent forces beyond our control. The Disciples' panic when confronted by the storm revealed the true resiliency of their trust/faith in Jesus; in their efforts to save themselves, they forgot Jesus. How often is this our experience? When the clouds of doubt gather and the waves of fear sweep over us; who here hasn't stubbornly battled with the storm alone, blindly forgetting that Jesus is One who can help us? How often do we trust our own strength till our hope is lost? How often are we caught out too deep in danger of becoming another shipwrecked soul? How often? Do we remember Jesus then? Do we call upon Him to save us? Do we cry out "*S.O.S!*"

Friends, no matter how fierce the tempest, those who turn to Jesus with the cry, "*Lord, save us/me,*" will find deliverance as He shelters us safe in His embrace – just as the Psalmist wrote; "*He made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed. Then are they glad because they had quiet; and He brought them to their desired haven.*" Amen.