

In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen

[Bell rings] My grandfather told me that this bell was from his old seaworthy boat, but I have my doubts. He was a man given to tall tales, you know. And he was no seaman. But, I think he was captivated by tales of going to sea, as many are. There is, truly something about imagining yourself out at sea, away from the civilized shore, free to head in any direction without a trail to follow or a schedule to meet. Only the vast expanse of water, stretching seemingly on forever in every direction towards any point on the horizon. Liberty and longing. Independence and imagination. Freedom, and fear. Great adventures played out on warships and ocean liners and pirate ships. Great travels of discovery we all imagined in school of Hudson and Drake and Columbus. No wonder that on this planet which is 75% ocean our literature, fact and fiction and film, are full of sea-going stories. Think of Melville's Moby Dick, or Hemingway's Old Man and the Sea, Disney's Pinocchio or Hollywood's Titanic. And no wonder that the experience of being at sea has become such a vibrant metaphor for the course of our very lives: Sometime we have smooth sailing. Sometimes we endure the storms. Sometime we are caught in the doldrums with no wind in our sails at all

Today our experience of the sea is most often flying over it, and it still somehow has a mysterious quality about it. But up until the time many of us were born, the only way to travel from one continent to another was by sea. And the sea can be an unpredictable route. In colonial America, those who wished to become Episcopal, or Anglican, priests had to make the perilous North Atlantic crossing to be ordained, since the British would not permit bishops in the New World. (That would certainly cause you to ponder the sincerity of your vocational choice, wouldn't it?!) All mail and messages were transported by ship, as were packages and people, their delivery date entirely vulnerable to the ocean's whim. Icebergs, hurricanes, currents, trade winds, and gales could divert any passage, just like the many obstacles and misfortunes which can divert the course of our own lives. When we hear a shot across the bow, or are caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, it may be time to batten down the hatches and call for all hands on deck.

In the Bible, there are many who go down to the sea in ships, as Psalm 107 so beautifully puts it. And their lives are measured by the course choices they make and the help they receive from God's mercy. Think of Noah's family and their disturbing days at sea. Or of Jonah's desperate deep-water encounter with the great fish. Or of God's merciful parting of the Sea of Reeds for the escaping Israelites, and God's closing of it again to destroy the Egyptian chariots. The Biblical point is that God is the master of the seas, and while the waves roll and swell, they do so only with God's permission. As we live our lives, making waves and rocking the boat, we do so only with God's permission, for God is the ultimate master of our lives as well. God is the captain of our ship. And it is God's hope that the courses we chart will not result in unintended shipwrecks.

The Apostle Paul had to become a seafarer, had to learn the ropes, as sailors would say, to work his ministry of evangelism around the eastern Mediterranean, and he himself was shipwrecked in this unpredictable life. In this letter to the Corinthians, from which we heard this morning's reading, he describes his life as being one of enduring afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments,

riots, labors, sleepless nights, and hunger, all for the sake of spreading the Gospel. His course was seldom one of smooth sailing, but in looking to Jesus as a model sailor of Life's seas, he persevered with purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God. And in doing so, he discovered the mystery, the paradox of God's depth, that those who travel faithfully with God, though they be treated as impostors, they yet are genuine; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see-- they are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything. The vessel of the faithful is no ship of fools, no matter what the cynical landlubbers might think.

In contrast, Jesus' disciples seem curiously haphazard about their lives as they embark on this voyage across the Sea of Galilee. That evening, as the darkness descended on them, so did a great windstorm, and the sea rolled beneath them and threatened to sink their ship. Yet, to their amazement and frustration, Jesus was napping comfortably. When they woke him, with terror in their hearts and on their lips, he simply turned into the wind and shouted "Peace, be still," stop it ! He spoke as one would speak to an unruly child. And the wind did stop, and the sea calmed, and the disciples were amazed. Jesus wonders at their lack of faith, which he implies is the antidote to their fear. In this storm, as in the course of their lives, their faith should sustain them, bring them peace of mind, and cause their fears to pipe down. God is in control, but meanwhile it never hurts to ask for help when our lives get really stormy.

On my living room wall are two large 19th century Currier and Ives prints I inherited from my great grandmother. They are both seaside drawings, one titled Pilgrim Exiles depicts a father mother and daughter dressed in pilgrim clothing looking out to sea from the barren coast of rock and sand, perhaps reflecting on their difficult journey across the ocean to Plymouth colony. Perhaps also reflecting on the creature comforts they left behind in England. Liberty and longing. A paradox of decision. A confidence in the Gospel. An awe at Jesus' call when he said, Let us go to the other side. The other print is called The Two Farewells, and depicts two women, ostensibly the wives of whalers, standing in the New England sand dunes waving handkerchiefs at two ships heading out to sea. One woman is dressed in white, the other in black. The lives they and their husbands have chosen are laced with unpredictability, as ours often are. Freedom and fear. Life's two sisters, who pass by like ships in the night.

And there is one more feature of this ocean metaphor, as we consider how being at sea reminds us of the nature of our lives. And that is the harbor. In another of the Jesus Sea of Galilee stories, Jesus' presence on the boat with the disciples brings them immediately to the other shore, to their destination. And after long periods bobbing around on the seas of life, we, too, may take the pleasures of a harbor. Some may find the safety of a harbor among their families, or in their marriages, or even at their church! I think of our teenagers, who after graduation or some other milestone, say "Anchors aweigh" and sail out into the vast and open sea of their futures, hopefully filled with the gospel confidence of Paul and the wisdom of scripture. And in the company of Jesus. And I pray that we can be a treasured harbor for each of them. May we be ready to receive them as they return to their moorings, whether they have been through tempest or triumph. May we rejoice in those trinkets they bring to show us from their travels, and may our arms be wide open to embrace them when their ship comes in! Amen