

“When the wind is against us” a sermon preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin on Sunday 13 August 2017 based on Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28 and Matthew 14:22-33.

I was recently at one of those theatres that really put you into the movie. The seats had hydraulics that enabled them to move and tilt. There were seat belts so we were safe when the seat tilted forward. At the right time mist fell on our faces.

The movie took us through landscapes. There was a mountain range, and there we were swooping up to the top of the mountain, over its sharp snowy edge, down into the valley, my stomach in my mouth, then gliding above animals grazing beside a river.

I kept hoping, please no more mountains and valleys, no more swooping down! Sure enough, another mountain. I closed my eyes.

I knew on one level I was sitting in a theatre strapped to a seat. Yet there I was, swooping over a mountain.

Today we need hydraulics under our pews, buckets of water thrown in our faces, the sound of wind in our ears.

A rough crossing of Foveaux Strait. The wind comes up. The waves batter the boat. And not by accident.

Matthew said Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead. While he goes up a mountain to pray – ha!

He’s up a mountain. We are out on the lake, far from shore. He comes to them and speaks to them – “Take heart it is I; do not be afraid.”

Surely he had to shout to make himself heard. “What did he say? Did you hear what he said?”

Then Peter says – “If it is you, tell me to come to you on the water.”

In the middle of the storm, the wind howling, the waves beating, the boat rocking, Peter gets out of the boat. Water was the realm of demons, the enemies of all that is good and right. Water was chaos and threat, the formless deep, where Leviathans swam.

And for us, where are our demons, what do we fear?

Peter steps into that realm. “Peter, you fool! Stay with the boat!”

“As for the rest of us, batten down the hatches! Take down the sails! Stay as safe as possible. Hold on!”

No, Jesus did not say that.

Richard Bode was a sailor. He wrote a book - *First You Have to Row a Little Boat*.

Sailing taught Bode about "the relationships between myself and the elements over which I had no control. You have to use whatever the weather gives you. You can't control it." (p. 3).

Sailors know we live with the illusion that we are in control, the "presumption of dominion." "We believe we own the world, that it belongs to us, that we have it under our firm control." But the sailor knows all too well the fallacy of this view.

"The hurricane, the typhoon, the sudden squall--they are all sharp reminders of the puniness of man when measured against the momentous forces of nature. We are not in total charge of our fate. We are subject to death, accident, disease. We can, without warning, lose love, work, home." (p. 24).

Joseph learned that.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says religious violence starts with sibling rivalry and is "the dominant theme of the book of Genesis."

The Joseph story of sibling rivalry begins when he is seventeen and ends with his death in Egypt at the age of a hundred and ten. He spent ninety-three years exiled from his family.

Joseph's brothers resented their father's favoritism that privileged Joseph over them. So they sold Joseph to Midianite merchants who then sold him to an Egyptian official named Potiphar.

Thus began thirteen years of slavery and imprisonment. As history unfolded, roles were reversed.

Joseph's brothers and family became beggars in a famine.

Joseph was elevated to be Pharaoh's second-in-command.

When their fratricide was exposed, the brothers expected retaliation. In contrast to his brothers who tried to kill him out of jealousy, Joseph forgave his brothers out of a sense of God's providence.

"Don't be afraid," Joseph assured his brothers. "Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good."

At least four times Joseph reassures his nervous brothers that "it was not you who sent me to Egypt, but God." (Genesis 45:5, 7, 8, 9).

Joseph left judgement to God.

But he also could sense life amid the headwinds.

I do not believe God sends suffering.

Yet in the providence of God, there can be life in storms.

In his book *Prayers for a Privileged People* (2008) the Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann writes:

Last night as I lay sleeping,

I had a dream so fair...

I dreamed of the Holy City, well ordered and just.

I dreamed of a garden of paradise, well-being all around and a good water supply.

I dreamed of disarmament and forgiveness, and caring embrace for all those in need.

I dreamed of a coming time when death is no more.

Last night as I lay sleeping...

I had a nightmare of sins unforgiven.

I had a nightmare of land mines still exploding and maimed children.

I had a nightmare of the poor left unloved,

of the homeless left unnoticed,

of the dead left un-grieved.

I had a nightmare of quarrels and rages and wars great and small.

When I awoke, I found you still to be God,

presiding over the day and night

with serene sovereignty,

for dark and light are both alike to you.

At the break of day we submit to you

our best dreams

and our worst nightmares,

asking that your healing mercy should override threats,

that your goodness will make our

nightmares less toxic

and our dreams more real.

The early church loved the image of the small boat sailing into a storm. It was their story.

Now the symbol of the World Council of Churches is of a sail boat on a sea. We went sometimes to a church in Sydney called "Little boat, big sea."

In the 1950s, after World War Two, the church came into a cultural port. Society and church together, supporting each other. People were drawn to church in numbers, through to the early 1960s.

Then the tide went out.

The church was left high and dry.

In hindsight, because great numbers of people came, the church thought it was successful, that it needed to keep doing what it then did, even as people stopped coming.

God has pushed the boat out of the harbour. Jesus has sent us into the storm. To where the wind blows and the seas are rough and fears surface.

To learn not to rely on culture, on any external prop, on our own capacity or strength. Rather to say – “Lord, if it is you, command us to come to you on the water.”

Out in the city, in the community, in the neighbourhood.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who faced headwinds of a terrible kind, eventually to be martyred by the Nazis in 1944, wrote of this passage-

“Peter had to leave the ship and risk his life on the sea, in order to learn both his own weakness and the almighty power of his Lord. If Peter had not taken the risk, he would never have learned the meaning of faith ... the road to faith passes through obedience to the call of Jesus. Unless a definite step is demanded, the call vanishes into thin air, and if people imagine that they can follow Jesus without taking this step, they are deluding themselves like fanatics.”

A member of our church council reminds us of the difference between conservation and preservation. That there is a danger in confusing the two, in imagining we conserve the church by preserving it, by preserving what we have.

Preservation may be the greatest risk to conservation.

We are not an organisation like other organisations needing to be relevant or attractive.

We live only by obedience to the living Christ.

Christ lives. Christ moves. Christ calls. Christ acts. Christ is the eternal now. In the city around us. Always evolving, calling, moving.

So we say – if it is you, command us to come to you on the waters.

Our identity rests in Jesus of the stormy seas. He alone. Nothing else. No one else.

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