

IMAGINE THAT! – A Ship on the Sea

Acts 27:13-25

For these three weeks our sermon series is titled IMAGINE THAT! based on Proverbs 30:18-19: *Three things are too wonderful for me; four I do not understand: the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a serpent on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a maiden.* Here in these two verses we find rich imagery that stimulates our imaginations, mesmerizing images that disclose salient truths about our spiritual lives. Last Sunday we spoke of the eagle in the sky, the winds of God's liberation that lift us and cause us to mount up with wings like eagles. The next *thing* in line is the *way of a serpent on a rock*, but since I have an aversion to snakes—rooted no doubt in a neurotic post-Eden phobia—we'll silently pass by that second *thing too wonderful for me, which I do not understand* and move swiftly on to the third thing: *the way of a ship on the high seas.*

And so today: *IMAGINE THAT! – A Ship on the Sea*

I. Imagine That! – A Ship that Sails with Grace

*I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky,
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by,
And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking,
And a gray mist on the sea's face and a gray dawn breaking.ⁱ*

Imagine that! a tall ship that sails with infinite grace. . . a magnificent sea-going vessel, with a bowsprit and three masts, each with a top mast and top-gallant mast, and square-rigged on all three masts, the white sails full and by, the ship held as close to the wind as possible with the sails full and not a ripple of shivering in any of the canvas, gliding effortlessly through the silent waves, on the wind with her sheets hauled as far aft as possible. She heads breezing toward a distant horizon, her figurehead majestically pointing the way to unseen shores, vast in hull and spar and masts, her pregnant sails shimmering white against an immense azure sky. Imagine that! What a thing of beauty! It's something too wonderful for me, something I cannot understand: the way of a ship sailing gracefully upon the sea. Sailing! One of the most ancient of means for getting around the world!

As we happen upon the Apostle Paul in this morning's passage, sailing is the means of conveyance that plays a central part in his being transported to Rome to stand trial before the emperor. Paul had journeyed along the coast of Macedonia and Asia Minor, setting up Christian churches throughout that region. He finally arrived in Jerusalem, was arrested, and taken as a prisoner to Caesarea, where he was held in custody for two years, afterwards taken as a prisoner to Rome. It is here at this time that Paul on his sailing voyage to Rome meets disaster. A prisoner on the ship, Paul advised the Centurion **not** to set sail since the voyage would be in great danger, subject to enormous loss.ⁱⁱ The Centurion, however, deferred to the pilot and to the owner of the ship, and the 276 people weighed anchor, setting off in a moderate south wind.

No sooner had they set sail, however, when a violent northeaster rushed upon them from Crete, and, rather than a thing of beauty gliding effortlessly through the silent waves of a friendly sea, Paul's ship spun out of control and was tossed about viciously, bobbing like a small cork in a typhoon of such violence that the mariners had to give the ship to the gale and scud before it for 14 days, the sails lowered and the ship drifting wherever the storm would drive it.

One of my friends describes sailing as *hours of unrelenting boredom alternating with moments of sheer terror.*ⁱⁱⁱ How aptly this applies here to Paul's experience at sea!

II. Imagine That! – A Ship that Scuds with Terror

*One might think that in two weeks the wind would have lulled a little.
But the sea, having upon it the additional agitation and accumulating force of fourteen persistent days and nights became infinitely more terrific than when the typhoon began. Every various appearance the seas*

*presented on this fourteenth day bore the sense of being swelled beyond imaginable proportions; and the height to which the breakers rose and rolled in with interminable rhythm and rapidity left the sailors, soldiers, and prisoners paralyzed by fear, immobilized in paroxysms of dread. In the agitation of the blinding wind, the stinging spray upon the face, and the awful noise—the tremendous sea itself confounded them. As the high watery walls came rolling in, and, at their highest, tumbled thunderously upon the main deck, the gigantic waves looked as if the least of them would swamp the ship. As each receding wave swept back with a hoarse roar, it seemed to scoop out deep caves in the billows below, as if its purpose were to swallow up the sea itself. When some **white-headed** billows thundered on, every fragment of the thimble-like vessel was tossed helplessly in the great sea and seemed inevitably doomed by the full might of its wrath. Swelling billowy hills were changed to watery valleys, undulating fathomless valleys were lifted up to insurmountable hills; masses of water shivered and shook the ship with a booming sound; every shape of breaker tumultuously rolled on, as soon as made, to change its shape and place, and beat another shape and place farther away; the ideal shore on the horizon remained invisible to the terrified eyes on deck; but visible or no, that horizon rose and fell with every lurch of the vessel's uncontrollable undulation. Paul and the others seemed to see a **rending** of all of nature in a terrifying upheaval by a force completely beyond their control.^{iv}*

Imagine that! A ship tossed about on the high seas, a thing too filled with wonder for us, and we cannot understand how that sea-faring vessel could possibly stay afloat.

This entire episode strikes a note of terror not only in the passengers but in us as well. For it summons up remembrances of those times when threatening circumstances have been beyond our control, when, even, perhaps we have **spun** out of control, when we were absolutely helpless in the face of life's pitiless storms, or life broke up like a tiny ship on a seething sea.

I think of the tragic deaths of three women and the incomparable trauma of several others in an LA Fitness aerobics class on August 4. As you know, when George Sodini has done his worst, three women lay dead and bleeding on the floor while nine other women writhed wounded nearby. The winds of misfortune had blown a calamitous curse upon them, and the billowy waves of disaster had swamped their small, defenseless life vessels in the wake of tempestuous animosity—in a isonomy of sickly misogyny. In contrast to their stormy, dramatic, torrential trauma, Farah Fawcett's turbulent battle with terminal cancer was characterized by an elongated swamping of her ship: a more persistent, ominous storm with dark clouds hanging perpetually upon the horizon. You and I hear our own dreadful reports about cancer or HIV or muscular dystrophy or heart attacks or lung deterioration or other worrisome conditions; and at some point we find ourselves amidst waves that are taller than our little ship of life. I think also how some of us have wrestled the winds of ill fortune day after day seeking meaningful employment and the appropriate use of our talents and calling. At the same time others on the streets of Pittsburgh and major cities in our country are tossed helplessly around by the circumstance of hunger and poverty, barely eking out a mere existence while other lives in other countries diminish under the dark clouds of war, terrorism, ethnic cleansing, or vengeful genocide. When any of these dire circumstances is beyond our control, we feel as helpless as seven men entangled in a submersible at the bottom of the Pacific.^v

Then there are those of us who are aging, either gracefully or resentfully.

Last Sunday our nephew related to Beth and me his experience at the Post-Gazette Pavilion at Star Lake. He and his younger brother had gone to see in concert Lil'Wayne—prominent rap star—among thousands of other young enthusiasts. As he spoke in glowing terms of the evening, it came to mind that exactly four years ago this month, Beth and I had gone to a concert at the very same location . . . with our daughter Emily, who was seventeen at the time. Coldplay! The band, Coldplay. The **rock** band Coldplay. Imagine that! Imagine me at Coldplay!

Taking a hasty survey of the crowd, I discovered that there was not another white haired man in the entire sea of faces. Now it was up for debate as to who was more self-conscience as we passed through the turnstiles: this gray-haired man with a seventeen-year-old daughter, or the seventeen-year-old daughter who could spot no other father of antiquity anywhere in the thousands of people surrounding us.

As Beth and I sat on a blanket on the grass, as the sound of the music reverberated through the ground beneath us, and as the persistent vibrations attacked our bodies like thunderous waves upon our deck, we looked around and saw that we were immersed in a sea of youth culture: attractive, dark-haired, blonde-haired, vibrant, enthusiastic young men and women; and they possessed what I'll never have again: **youth**. Like others in my time of life, I am on a sea-path of aging from which there is no return passage, no going back to the joys and advantages of youth. Like it or not, aging is beyond my control . . . and, I suppose, for some of you, beyond your control as well.

Hunger, poverty, disease, shrinking wealth, the winds of war and terror, aging, diminishing strength and shrinking mental acumen . . . like typhoons that threaten our little vessels on the high seas of life!

III. Imagine That! – the God Who Is in Control

Today, the Apostle Paul has a word for us: **Keep up your courage**. Paul mounted the pulpit of the ship's prow^{vi} so to speak. *First, he reminded everyone on board of his advice not to start out. He could not resist that. It is an almost irresistible human impulse to say "I told you so" when our advice is proved by the eventual outcome of things to have been right. But then Paul took a different tack. I now bid you take heart; for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. What sublime confidence! There will be no loss of life.*^{vii} Why? Because an angel of God appeared in a vision and told him so.^{viii}

Here it is! Imagine this! A God who is in control, who holds out the certainty that we shall not only survive the shipwrecks of our life but that we shall ultimately live victoriously in his everlasting presence.

At times you and I face seemingly insurmountable problems in our individual lives. **Those times** when we are confronted by dire circumstances and situations that seem to have no exit or solutions; **those times** when we see that there is something in ourselves that makes peace a rare experience; **those times** when we discover that there is something in us that makes peace of mind an intangible . . . an allusive, evasive goal, never reached or—at least—seldom realized; **those times** are in God's hands.

What is truly too wonderful for us is that Paul—caught in this terrible plight, having been shackled for years on end and about to experience shipwreck—stands and, over the thunderous waves, shouts: **Keep up your courage, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told**. Paul—trapped, shackled, well into the autumn of his life, and only a short time before the tomorrow of his death—is shouting, **"Keep up your courage! Keep up your courage!"**

What is the secret for peace of mind for Paul? How could he be a non-anxious presence in such a despicable dilemma? In another place in his writings Paul issued the same encouragement: *have no anxiety about anything; the Lord is at hand.*^{ix} Imagine that! *The Lord is at hand!* Five words. Isn't this a magnificent statement! A five-word affirmation of faith, which is empowering, uplifting, which ultimately provides us with the victory and conviction that carries us through this life as joyous Christians. What Paul is speaking of here is the empowering proximity of God in Christ. Nearer than breath, dearer than life, God resides with us in Jesus Christ, the very same Christ who confronted Paul on the Road to Damascus. Because God made his Presence known in Christ, Paul can confidently raise his voice in the midst of the storm and declare: *I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told*. He is the God who is in control, who has come to be with us in an empowering proximity: the Lord who is at hand, anywhere you turn, in every storm, nearer than breath dearer than life. So what could the world do to Paul that God could not undo? Shipwreck, imprisonment, flogging, humiliation, tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword or execution?

For thy sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered . . . but nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.^x

You and I are here in this place this morning, not only to hear an encouraging word for tomorrow, a word to sustain us throughout the week, but also because we—at some time in our voyage of life—have

experienced the power of God; we have had a convictional experience that consciously or unconsciously convinces us that we have faith in God that it will be exactly as we have been told.

What can the world do to us that God cannot undo or restore or redeem in an ultimate victory over life? Disease, hunger, financial disaster, loss of job, death of our children or death of our spouse?

Conclusion: Be of Good Courage

So, friends, let us keep up our courage!

We have faith in God that it will be exactly as we have been told, for he is in control: *death shall have no dominion*;^{x1} anxiety shall have no sway. In this affirmation is power. In this affirmation is perfect peace.

*I met God in the morning
When my day was at its best,
And His presence came like sunrise,
Like a glory in my breast.*

*All day long the Presence lingered,
All day long He stayed with me,
And we sailed in perfect calmness
O'er a very troubled sea.*

*Other ships were blown and battered,
Other ships were sore distressed,
But the winds that seemed to drive them
Brought to us a peace and rest.*

*Then I thought of other mornings,
With a keen remorse of mind,
When I too had loosed the moorings,
With the Presence left behind.*

*So I think I know the secret,
Learned from many a troubled way;
You must seek Him in the morning
If you want Him through the day!^{xii}*

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Notes

ⁱ John Masefield, *Sea Fever* [1902], stanza 1

ⁱⁱ See Acts 27:9-11

ⁱⁱⁱ Charles Partee, *St. Paul and the God Poseidon*, The Presbyterian Outlook, November 2000, paragraph 3

^{iv} This entire paragraph in italics relies heavily upon Charles Dickens' description of the storm that takes Steerforth's life in *David Copperfield*, Chapter LV, *The Tempest*. Many of the phrases in this paragraph are my own, however.

^v A reference to the seven men in a Russian submarine entangled in fishing nets or antennas at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean and freed by the British, August 2005

^{vi} See Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, Chapter 8

^{vii} Theodore P. Ferris, *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 9, Exposition, p. 337

^{viii} Acts 27:23-24

^{ix} See Philippians 4:4-7

^x See Romans 8:31-39

^{xi} See Dylan Thomas' poem, *Death Shall Have No Dominion*

^{xii} Ralph Spaulding Cushman, *The Secret*, [1879]