***AVOIDING SHIPWRECKS***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

September 11, 2016

Texts: Psalm 46:1-7 and 1 Timothy 1:1-7, 18-19

 Fifteen years ago today two jets crashed into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York, another struck the Pentagon in Washington, a fourth crash-landed in a field in southcentral Pennsylvania, and the post-9/11 world began for all of us in America. It was, to borrow an image from Paul’s first letter to Timothy, a great shipwreck for our nation, and almost 3,000 people went down with the ship. Many of the victims were passengers on the jets, but many others were business people going about their business and first responders being first to respond at the crash sites. Many of the victims were Americans, but many were from other nations of the world. Many of the victims were Christian, but all of the world’s major religions were represented in the carnage that day.

 Fifteen years later we still bear scars from those attacks. The images from that day continue to haunt our national memory. The sites of the crashes have been claimed as sacred ground as memorials to those who died there. TSAs and long lines at airports are living reminders of the response to the attacks in a continuing effort to assure that such tragedies are not repeated. We have not abandoned the skies, more people are flying now than ever, but we are more aware of the potential for problems. Much of the rest of the world had been living with the reality of terrorism before 9/11, but on that day we joined them. We are now more aware, more defensive, suspicious, and cautious for we realize that we are more vulnerable than we knew before 9/11. Overnight the world changed, or perhaps more accurately, our perception of the world changed.

 In the 46th Psalm, the psalmist acknowledges that our world does indeed change from time to time – sometimes from natural disasters like hurricanes or earthquakes and sometimes from disasters of human origin – like 9/11. In the midst of such changes and the angst and uncertainty that accompany them, the psalmist assures us that God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Fifteen years ago we gathered in this space with our brothers and sisters from the other north end churches to echo that promise, and as importantly, to affirm our faithful response which is the response of the psalmist: WE WILL NOT FEAR! We will not fear terrorists, we will not fear change, we will not fear living – even when living seems precarious! For the Lord is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in trouble!

 Those words are especially important when other voices are telling us to be afraid, and a lot of folks are doing that these days – telling us to be afraid of Muslims and immigrants, to be afraid of those not like us, to be afraid of changes in the world, to be afraid of the other party’s presidential candidate, to be afraid of God. As we have seen in our nation and world, such fearmongering can lead to actions that violate basic human rights and God’s call to faithful living. The justification is that desperate times require desperate measures, yet God’s call to us is not prefaced with the words, “If you are not afraid..” Jesus doesn’t say, “If you are not afraid, then love your neighbor. If you are not afraid, then pray for your enemy. If you are not afraid, then turn the other cheek. If you are not afraid, then take up your cross and follow me. If you are not afraid, then be the servant of all. If you are not afraid, then lay down your life for your friends.” Jesus simply says, “Fear not. Love your neighbor as yourself. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Turn the other cheek. Deny yourself, take up your cross daily, and follow me. Be the servant of all. Greater love has no one than to lay down one’s life for a friend.” As one writer has suggested, “*The opposite of love is not hate. It’s fear. That’s why Scripture says, ‘Perfect love casts out fear.*’”[[1]](#endnote-1) Jesus calls us

 to love despite our fear,

 to love through any fear,

 to love and not fear for God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

 In the letter to Timothy that we read this morning, Paul tells his young colleague that the aim of all the instruction he is offering is this: love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, sincere faith. In other words, the aim of Christian teaching and Christian living is to nurture an ethic of love that is ingrained in us, love that is a way of life grounded in faith, love that motivates and guides our actions, love that is constant in us in an ever-changing and even scary world. Nurturing that life of love, that conscience of love, might be a pretty good aim for Christian Education. That is not to say that we can attain it perfectly. Sometimes it is hard to discern what love demands; sometimes conflicting loves force hard choices. How do you love your neighbor and your enemy when your enemy threatens your neighbor or when your neighbor threatens your enemy? It isn’t always clear what love demands. It often isn’t easy, but we are called to strive to love as Jesus loved anyway. As theologian Reinhold Niebuhr notes:

*The love ideal which Jesus incarnates may be too pure to be realized in life, but it offers us nevertheless an ideal toward which the religious spirit may strive.[[2]](#endnote-2)*

It is that ideal toward which we strive every day: to love as Jesus loved, for that is how Jesus calls us to love. Paul warns Timothy that there are those who have deviated from that rule of love for their own warped purposes. As he describes it, they have turned to meaningless talk “without understanding either what they are saying or the thing about which they make assertions.” In other words, they compromise faith and faithfulness to pursue other ends – less faithful ends, often selfish ends. How do you identify them?

 Paul suggests that a good conscience is the radar that warns you of those charlatans. It is a good conscience shaped by faith and by that rule of love that Jesus calls us to live into. It is that voice in your head that warns you that something is amiss, that the good is being compromised, that faithfulness demands something other than what is being suggested. There are a host of folks who want to shape that voice, but Paul urges that faith in Christ and love alone should shape it. Those who ignore that voice have suffered shipwrecks, says Paul. They’ve been lost, adrift and floundering. He should know, for as he writes to the church in Rome:

*I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.* (Romans 7:18-19)

We are prone to sin, prone to do the wrong instead of the right, but Paul urges us to do the right thing and avoid those shipwrecks in faith that result from choosing the wrong.

 The story is told of a little lifesaving station on a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks often occurred. The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept constant watch over the sea, and with no thought for themselves went out day and night, risking life and limb, to search for the lost. Many lives were saved by the crews of this little station, and it became famous. Some of those who were saved from the sea, as well as neighbors in the area, wanted to help with the work of the little station. They donated time, money and effort. New boats were purchased, new crews trained, and the little lifesaving station grew.

 Over time, some members of the lifesaving station became unhappy that the building was so crude and poorly equipped. They felt that a more comfortable place should be provided as the first refuge of those saved from the sea. So they replaced the emergency cots with beds and put better furniture in an enlarged building. Soon the lifesaving station became a popular gathering place for the members; they decorated it beautifully with nautical themes, and furnished it comfortably, and began to use it as a sort of club. Fewer members were now interested in risking their lives by going to sea, so they hired lifeboat crews to do that dangerous work. The lifesaving motif still prevailed in the club’s decoration, and there was even a liturgical lifeboat in the room where club initiations were held.

 About this time a large ship was wrecked off the coast. The hired crews brought in boatloads of cold, wet, half-drowned people. They were dirty and sick, a huddled mass of multi-colored, multi-national, multi-lingual refugees from the sea. The beautiful club was in chaos, and so the property committee had a shower house built just outside the club so that victims of any shipwrecks could be cleaned up before coming inside.

 At the next meeting of the club, there was a split among the membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club’s lifesaving activities since they were unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal social life of the club. Other members insisted that life-saving was their primary purpose and pointed out that they were still called “a lifesaving station.” But they were voted down and told that if they wanted to save the lives of the various kinds of people who were shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin their own lifesaving station – down the coast. And so they did! As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes that had occurred in the old. It evolved from a lifesaving station into a club and yet another new lifesaving station was founded. History continued to repeat itself, and if you visit that seacoast today, you will find a number of exclusive clubs dotting the shoreline. Shipwrecks are still frequent in those waters, but most of the people drown![[3]](#endnote-3)

 Shipwrecks are still frequent in the waters in which we live, and we are called to help those who are drowning, including those drowning in sorrow or poverty or despair or hopelessness or fear. We are called to reach out to them in love even at risk to ourselves as those first responders did on 9/11. We are called to do the right thing even when it is not the thing we want to do, even when it is the thing we are afraid to do. If we live in fear in this post-9/11 world, then to paraphrase the 1st century writer Seneca, we are shipwrecked even before we get aboard.[[4]](#endnote-4) But if we dare to believe what Jesus says and trust the promises of God, then we may venture out on troubled waters without fear, for God is still our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble, a very present help in all kinds of trouble. Amen

1. John McCoy quoted by Theodore J. Wardlaw in “Ugly Signs of Fear”, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, Feb.1, 2016, p.31 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Ethic of Jesus and the Social Problem”, *Love and Justice*, Westminster/John Knox Press: Louisville, 1957, p.38 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. “Parable” by Theodore Wedel, taken from *Basic Types of Pastoral Counseling*, Howard Clinebell, Jr., pp.14-15 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Lucius Annaeus Seneca, Epistles, 87, 1, cited *in Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations*, Little, Brown and Company: Boston, 1992, p.102 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)