

“Kiss the Wave”

Dear Friends, greetings this morning in the name of our Lord Jesus.

To get us going, I want to share just a few thoughts from last weekend. The holiday weekend, Mary and I were not here on Sunday. We took the weekend off and spent it up in Arnold, (Big Trees area), relaxing and spending time with some of our family.

Before heading up there, we had a couple of days with Mary's brother (here in San Jose) who was visiting from Minnesota. We played golf on Wednesday and (on the 4th of July) took in a baseball game (up in Oakland) between the A's and the Minnesota Twins. I'm not a fan of either one, but spending a day at the ballpark with family and some good food (and drink) is not a bad way to spend any day.

On Sunday morning, we worshiped in a place called the Chapel of the Pines. It's a small church (in Arnold) where we've worshiped before; a nondenominational setting, a praise band and a more Bible study approach to preaching (verse by verse) than we usually take here, and certainly a less structured approach (to worship) than we're used to as Lutheran Christians, even though every worship structure (including the non-structured) has some kind of structure at work.

Anyway, what was reinforced (for me) last week, in this small church, even though the structure and the approach were different, was the fact that (no matter what's happening in life), no matter where you are and where you go, it's the same Spirit and the same God and the same Christ who are present and at work in the lives of the people.

I didn't know all of the songs they were singing, but I knew enough of them to feel at home. And I didn't necessarily agree with all of the theology in the preaching. That's one of the vocational hazards that come with the preaching trade, having a hard time just sitting and listening to another preacher. But there was enough there to keep me there and to remind me that no matter where we're at and no matter what is happening around us (and in our lives), good or bad, there is always reason to worship and to praise and to thank God for who he is and for what he has done for us in Jesus.

I share that today, because, in this short little mini-series (this week and next), we're going to be talking (for these two weeks) about how as followers of Jesus, we want to worship the Lord even when the waves come, even when there's hardship and difficulties and suffering, we still want to worship the Lord.

This series is called “Kiss the Wave.” It comes from a quote of Charles Spurgeon, a well-known and respected preacher in the mid 1800's, in which (he says), “I have learned to kiss the wave that throws me against the Rock of Ages.”

The Rock of Ages is one of the names referenced in the Bible for God. It speaks of his stability and his strength, of the fact that he is unmovable and unshakable. He is strong. He is our sanctuary and our security. Isaiah, chapter 26, (it says) “Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord our God is the rock of ages.”

Spurgeon uses the metaphor of a wave to help us understand suffering and the hardships of life, so that when the waves come we don't just try to get through them or get past them. That's how we sometimes talk. “I'm going to endure. I'm going to persevere. I'm going to tough it out until it's over.” That's not all bad.

The Bible, however, (Spurgeon says), would teach us to kiss the wave, to embrace it, because God is doing something in us (during that time) that doesn't happen during other times. There are things God can teach us (in the midst of the waves) that we have a hard time learning and listening to when we're just hanging out (in Arnold) or at a ballgame. And so, when the waves come (he says), we want to learn to embrace them, because (in them) we will find (and learn) and discover more about the power and presence of God in deeper and more significant ways.

To give a bit of a context for his ministry, Charles Spurgeon, a preacher in the 1850's & 60's, he's said to have preached an average of four to five times per week during his working years. He had more than 3,600 sermons published. He had incredible influence. He also had incredible suffering.

He struggled with depression for most of his life. Some of you know how debilitating that can feel, especially when it doesn't go away for a month or a year. It's this constant companion. His wife was bed-ridden for about twenty-five years of their marriage. He received incredible opposition against some of what

And so, Spurgeon speaks about what it was like to experience the suffering, the waves of this life. Here's what he says about what he was experiencing. (He says), "I have been cast into 'waters to swim in', which, for God's upholding hand, would have been waters to drown in. I have endured tribulation from many flails. Sharp bodily pain succeeded mental depression. This was accompanied both by bereavement and affliction in the person of one so dear to me as life itself (Susannah). The waters rolled in continually, wave upon wave.

I do not mention this to exact sympathy, but simply to let the reader see that I am no dry-land sailor. I have traversed those oceans. I know the roll of the billows and the rush of the winds. Never were the promises of Jehovah so precious to me as at this hour. Some of them I never understood until now." He was fifty-three when he wrote that. He would die four years later.

What he is saying is that I'm not just talking to you in theory. "I am no dry-land sailor." I have experienced the waves of this life and they have cast me upon the Rock of Ages, and for that I am grateful. I have come to know the power and presence of God in a way that I would not have otherwise known.

Let's talk for a moment about waves. There are a number of things we know about waves. The first is the (simple fact) that the waves will come. (The waves will come.) Jesus told his disciples that "in this world you will find troubles." There will be things in this life that you neither desired nor saw coming. But they will come.

You go to the beach and start swimming in the water. It might be calm for a while, but it's only a matter a time before the waves come and it starts getting rough. It's going to happen, and so don't be surprised when it starts happening.

Peter, when he was writing to Christians who were suffering and being persecuted for their faith, he talked to them about this, because some of them were becoming disillusioned with God. Things had not turned out (in life) the way they had expected. And they were starting to blame God as a result.

They thought, if God is on our side, if I'm on "Team Jesus", then shouldn't the waters be a more calm? Shouldn't life be simpler (and easier) for those of us who follow Christ? Things weren't working out for them as they had planned and they wondered what was happening.

And so, Peter writes to them (in chapter four) to encourage them. He says, "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you." In other words, don't act like that just because you follow Jesus that you are somehow exempt from the sufferings of this life. It's not the case.

We have the Rock of Ages. We have a sanctuary in the storm. We have the promises of eternal life. But in this world, we will have troubles. And so don't be surprised (he says) when they come. Because, if you're not expecting it, not ready for it, when the waves come, they can be devastating.

There are a number of reasons why we get caught off guard by the waves. One of the reasons is that we have these unrealistic expectations. We have our ideas of what life is supposed to look like, and so when something happens that changes that, that knocks that off course, we start drowning.

Maybe it's a health diagnosis that knocks you off your feet. You don't know what to do. Or it's some marital challenge that you thought you would never have to deal with, but now you are. Maybe it's some unexpected financial burdens that keep coming, wave after wave, or some turbulent parenting waters that you thought you'd traverse through much easier. Maybe it's the loss of a loved one that you knew was coming (one day), but not as early as this day.

I've heard many people say, "I just never saw it coming." I just never thought it would happen to me. To someone else, 'Yes', but not to me. It's funny how that happens in life, especially as you live more of life. You can avoid things for a while, and every family (or individual), it's all different, but no one is immune. No one life continues to avoid it.

People ask the question, "Why me? Why me?" I think a better question is "Why not me?" (Why not me?) What makes me think that somehow my life is different, that somehow I am going to (be the exception) and avoid what the fallen-ness of a sinful world inevitably brings?

It's true. It's going to happen to all of us at some time. The waves will come. There will be times (in this life) that get tough. And so Peter writes to them and tells them to not be surprised. Don't have these unrealistic expectations for your life.

Sometimes you see this in young married couples. They're somewhat (set-up) for this. They have this picture of what married life will be like and how it's all going to be fun and smooth sailing and no troubled waters. They've been dating for a few years, a few hiccups along the way, but nothing out of the

In the little counseling I do to prepare couples for marriage, I try to talk through some of what they might want to expect in the first few years, some of the challenges that come with bringing two (separate lives) into one. And, for the most part, I think they appreciate the advice and the perspective from someone who has not only (walked through it) himself, but who has also watched (many couples) over the years try to figure it out.

But (once in a while), I get this feeling from them (this look) that this is all good stuff, much appreciated, (for someone else), but in our case we're good. No problems here. We're going to be just fine. Maybe they will. Maybe they won't. There's no (real way) to tell, until it happens.

Even if (and when) it happens, with in-laws or money or with raising children, (whatever), it's not that the waves (they are experiencing) are unusual or ones that can't be overcome. It's more that the expectations were unrealistic and (as a result), they can catch you off guard.

Another reason people get caught off guard is that they're operating with (what I'd call) an unbiblical theology. They grew up (and were taught), or at least they came to believe, (either implicitly or explicitly), that if you go to church and you follow Jesus, then everything's going to be good, and you're not going to have any problems, and life is going to be winning all the time. When that doesn't happen, it's easy to become disillusioned with God, disillusioned with your faith.

Peter gives us a theological basis for how we're to live with the waves we face. In chapter four (he says), "Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourself also with the same attitude..." expecting that suffering will come to you as well. In other words, if you follow a suffering Savior, don't be surprised when you suffer yourself. It's part of life. It's going to happen to all of us.

As so, we know the waves will come. We know it's going to happen. We also know, as Christians, the waves will stop. They won't come forever. The day is soon coming when the waves will be no more.

Again, Peter says, "...do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed." Our sufferings connect us with Christ in such a way that we will be filled with joy when he finally returns.

It's as if Peter is watching us get on a boat and about to sail (and take off) and he says, "Come here for a minute. I want to tell you something. I know you're getting ready to set sail on this journey. I just want you to know that it's going to get a little rough out there. The waters are going to get turbulent. There's going to be a hurricane or two that you're going to have to go through while you're at sea. I want to let you know that. There are going to be a couple of rouge waves that will knock you flat. You'll never see them coming. It's going to be scary at times. Just expect that to happen.

But it won't last forever. It'll be for just a moment. Before you know it, you will arrive at the port of heaven and the waters will be calm. And so, take some Dramamine. Hang in there. The waves are coming, but the waves will stop.

Revelation, chapter six, it describes the throne of heaven sitting on (what looks like) "a sea of glass." It's like crystal. I love that. There are no waves in heaven.

Just for fun, I started making a list of things that will no longer be in heaven. (You might want to try this sometime.) Here's what I came up with.

In heaven, there will be no more cancer, no more divorce, no more rejection, no more loneliness, no more depression; no more crutches or casts, no more wheelchairs or walkers or canes, no more radiation or chemotherapy, no more suicide bombers or school shootings, no more anxiety medication, no more middle of the night phone calls, no more crosses along the side of the road, no more child abuse, no more rapes, no more breakups, no more coughs or colds, no more flu shots, no more orphanages or convalescent homes, no more yelling, no more fighting, no more traffic or road rage, no more addiction, no more drugs, no more drama, no more bullying, no more anxiety, no more gossip, no more concussions, no more doctors, no more needles, no more two sides of the aisle always fighting, no more two sides to the story that can't get along, no more waiting rooms, no more funeral homes, no more animal hospitals, no more treatment centers, no more courtrooms, no more pink slips or foreclosure notices, no more still births or motionless ultrasounds, no more tears, no more crying, no more pain.

The Bible says, no more waves, because the One who sits on the throne "will make all things new." The waves will come. The waves will stop. And so, we worship in the waves.

Maybe the best example I know of (and this is how we'll close) comes from the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk. In chapter three, he describes the disappointment, the devastation all around him, and

grapes on the vine, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls...”

In this agricultural society, what he’s describing is wave upon wave upon wave, (he says), “...yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights.” And so, because our help is in the Rock of Ages, we can worship.

I don’t how you’d paraphrase Habakkuk. Maybe you’d say, “Though I’m unemployed, though my spouse has broken my heart, though my child is sick, though the cancer has returned, though everything in my life is a mess and my future is uncertain, though I miss that one who was with me for so many years, though I’m about to lose the one who has been with me in all of life, though things are happening that I just cannot figure out...nonetheless my hope is in the Lord.

Because we worship the Rock of Ages, we can have this illogical, unreasonable, (almost beyond understanding) spirit about worship that does not fit in with the world, and we will continue worshipping, even when the waves come. Let’s pray.