

The Royal Poinciana Chapel

Sermon By

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"O LORD, THY SEA IS SO GREAT, AND . . ."

Text: "Yonder is the sea, great and wide . . .
May the Glory of the Lord endure forever." -- Psalm 104:25, 31

The timing of sermons that I select and announce long before they are preached, sometimes gets my attention. E.g., years ago in Pittsburgh I announced a sermon in November for the next Easter called "Snowfall on Easter Morning." It referred to the time, years previously, when a freak snow storm came on Easter Sunday. We had planned a Sunrise Service at 6 a.m., and three regular Services later in the morning. The first two were cancelled: you couldn't get to the Church. By 9:30 we had the walks cleared and 14 people came to the Service. By 11:00 there were 32 to share the 250 Easter Lilies displayed around the Chancel. Now part of this story is that it hardly ever snows in Western Pennsylvania on Easter ... hardly ever.

We had a sign board out front which listed the weekly sermon topics. Every newspaper in town ran a photograph the next morning of the snow all over and around the sermon title: "Snowfall on Easter Morning." I was accused of causing the snow and the storm.

Many other times things seem to fit. Like last week I had long ago announced a sermon on forgiveness. Then the Starr Report was released during the week and the President was asking for forgiveness everywhere he went. I had to include him without refocusing the sermon.

Today I planned to preach a sermon on the power and enchantment and mystery of the sea, only to discover that hurricane Georges was about to whip its way into our corporate and individual lives late in the week. One thing is sure, a hurricane gets

your attention. You might say it is God's way of reminding us of how small are our boats, how fragile are our homes, how frail are our lives. Matched against the fury of a hurricane, there is not much you can do, except run. Oh Lord, Thy sea is so great, and my boat is so small. . . .

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This sermon was to be about the power of the sea, the attachment I have come to feel about the ocean right up the street from my home. It does not take long to become a believer. You can easily sense why the ancients crowned Old King Neptune, and why they learned to love the water. Spreading out before you, coming in from a thousand other shores, is that untiring phenomenon of motion, the epitome of all the well loved sights of nature's day. At night it's dark and scary. When you are captured by the sea, it does not matter what went on before, nor what is coming next. No matter that the daily din is there and waiting, and all the noise of all the worried cities of the world will claim your time again. No matter what the President is doing. One thing matters, and one alone: the deep humility of one little person and one large, gigantic sea.

The Bible often catches the story. It says repeatedly that God uses nature to accomplish His will. He did, and He does. The Bible, from Eden on, has a great respect and love for the land, the sea, and the sky, for the trees and shrubs, and plants and flowers and animals, and for man.

Psalm 8 begins, "*When I consider the heavens, the*

moon and stars which Thou has ordained, what is man that Thou art mindful of him?" He might have added, "When I consider the ocean, what and who is this human, so busy to grab and get in our great and busy world, doing it all, forgetting why we are here doing anything at all. It is good for man to be humbled by the sea. A hurricane puts us in our place. Thy sea is so great and my boat is so small. . . ."

And Psalm 104, knew that, too. That is the genius of those who write the Scripture. He was not a Psalmist all of the time. He knew earthquakes, wind, tempest, and fire. He knew wars and rumors of war. He knew race and greed and hate. He got disgusted and disgruntled. He knew the desert storms and all the wicked whims and wishes of the sea. He knew problems. He, too, grew older and worried for the future. He, too, got lost. But he knew the one thing you have to know: where to turn for help. There in the depth and power and mystery -- in the music of all the spheres God made. In this precious little verse he condenses it all into a sentence: "Yonder is the sea -- great and wide . . . May the Glory of the Lord endure forever!"

The Bible does not tell us how the Bible came to be. There are no recorded interviews with the authors, as to how and when or why they wrote. No one ever asked the Psalmist, "Where were you, Sir, when you wrote that?" Usually, we have to guess. But here I think I know. I think it was a tough new day somehow, when he was feeling very much alone, when he was trying to find his way around the court of old Jerusalem. Down on his luck and feeling low, he finally looked up and remembered who on earth he was, and why he was here. Before the foundations of the earth the Lord already was, "O God, I am a little Johnny-Come-Lately, to this place."

He could not have known how great and how wide. He would never have believed that his huge and seemingly endless Mediterranean Sea could be drained a thousand times into the vast places of the dark deep ocean bottom beyond. He could not have

known what we know now. But he had heard the hidden voices saying, "Yonder, over there, is something magnificent and immense." Think of it! Immensity is magnificent medicine. The One who formed this ocean depth; before whose power even the mightiest howling storm must cease, the one who fashioned all of nature's goodness out of nothing, is the One -- the same God who came to earth to love each lonely soul. The One who formed the starry heavens knows each of us by name.

Once water covered the face of the deep. Once it was all a stormy sea. Then the Spirit of God moved over the face of the water. While you were yet far away He was present back then. And long after you return home, refreshed, they say, and that brings a smile to your lips, this endless invisible movement will continue.

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We live in two worlds, you and I. Two worlds, two orders, two centers of attention, two places to set our feet. The one which we can see all around us, over which we seem to rule. One which exists on the planet earth, where things change, but at least we can usually observe the changes, and try to determine what to do about them. That is the one world where power works and brains and brawn pay off, where you have to be wary of what the others say and do, where you have to watch out for yourself.

But there is another world, right? . . . another world. A small part of everyone is saved up for the hopes and dreams of our lives, beyond all that we are and see and do. The world of promise and possibility. The world of potential and peace. The first is subject to the whim and wishes of the people who happen to populate it, and the things which people persist in making and doing right and wrong. The other is subject to the whim and wish of none of us. It is like the sea. The one world we can in part control, or at least we can put our oar into the water and try to row. In the other we are controlled. In one we get tired and old, and

tempers rise and things go wrong, and people break each others' hearts. In the other, there is no sadness nor sorrow at all, where, as Mike Vanderbilt said, "We all remain twenty years old in some little corner of our hearts."

We live in those two worlds; and what's more, we swing back and forth between. In the book of Revelation, in that great apocalypse which was written on the Isle of Patmos in the Mediterranean Sea, surrounded by water. There in the tenth chapter, John wrote of the mighty angel coming down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow over his head, and his face was like the sun. (You have to wonder about old John, don't you?) He (the angel) had a little scroll open in his hand. Then it says he put his right foot on the land and his left foot in the sea. I love that image. One solid, one moving -- one rock, the other sinking sand. One foot in each world.

Now an angel can accomplish that I guess, at the ocean. I recommend you not try it yourself when the waves come in unless you are quite agile or quite lucky. Both feet get wet . . . but we are dealing here with symbols. I'm lucky enough to live just around the corner from the ocean. Normally an advantageous position except when the hurricane comes. With each new morning there is a new scene.

I think that John, too, must have watched the sea days on end; watched how that pure and deep and certain magic rolls across the shore, watched and wrestled with his own thoughts. Our Psalmist picks up the theme again. In the 104th Psalm, he speaks to the One who has formed the heavens and who has laid the foundations of the earth. The One who set the paths for the seas: The creation and the Creator.

Ha, we talk about this terra firma, the solid earth. But, the whole planet is spinning around, hurling through space, held and hung together by laws of motion, is it? Or astrophysical dynamics? The solid earth is whizzing through expanding space at 100,000 miles per hour. Is it? At that speed, a

friend of mine used to say, "I want to know who's in charge and where we're going. Who has the wheel, and who is in control?"

It's simple, the Psalmist says (He will tell you if you listen) how it all fits together. The springs come into the valleys to water the earth, to give drink to the beasts of the field. The earth is satisfied with the water from the heavens. And the grass grows up for the cattle and the bread of the grain of the fields brings strength to man's heart. The moon comes round in its seasons. The sun goes up and down on schedule. So simple, so complete. Except that the spirit of God, must come to make it all worth while, and to increase our wonder.

It is a matter of trust ultimately. Why?, or where? We go on dating our time, minutes and hours and micro seconds even. "Hey, I'll see you tomorrow, Tommy, or next Tuesday, or next Season." We mark our space by the land and water, the mountains and the valleys and by our own fences and passwords and walls. But as Thoreau once said, "A little longer winter in the North, a little shift of world wide water, a little crumbling of a mountain or a rift in the earth itself, or a gigantic tidal wave or hurricane or a tiny blockage of the heart, and our time and space can end forever."

I feel so sorry for those people who took the brunt of the recent storm. I was in the Dominican Republic once to dedicate a Mission Hospital. I know the Santo Domingo area where the hurricane passed through. I pray for the people who live in little mud huts, made of cardboard. No floor at all. Six, eight, ten people in a 10x12 one-story space. No water or electricity. Thousands of them. I pray for them. Something like 200 lost their lives, right there alone. Pray for the others, ones you know everywhere, that somehow some good might come from this awful storm. We all know that some good came out of the horror of Hurricane Andrew. I pray the same will be true here. A hurricane keeps you humble.

We boast of how powerful we are; of how we can

harness the forces of the earth. We astonish ourselves with our own achievements. But there is more raw power in the eye of a huge storm than in any and all of our atom bombs on earth. We think we are in charge. Then we learn the truth. In a recent storm which brought damage to the Texas seaboard, a woman was heard to say, "Something should have been done about it! Somebody should have stopped it!" "Yeah, sure lady, you're right! But who and how, and why?" Once water covered the face of the deep and once it will again.

and evermore. Amen.

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And now we are done. Only to remind you before we go: If we live in two worlds, one totaliter aliter (totally other), the other totally here, the bridge between Eden and Everlasting, the contact point, the guarantee, is Jesus Christ. He was in love with nature, sure, but he was also in charge. He calmed the troubled waters, back then, on the Sea of Galilee. It is amazing for the length of the Gospel record . . . how many times it mentions storms.

One day, when it was awful, and they were scared to death, huddled together in the storm, in the bottom of the boat, sure that it was all over . . . then lo and behold (Are you listening?), they saw this form, this vision, this person walking on the water. (Can it possibly be? Yes, it can, it was, it is!) Lo and behold, it was the Lord, walking on the water, coming toward them to rescue them. They yelled, "Who is it?" In the dark clouds it was hard to see. It's easy to conjure up visions. But immediately He called back: "Take heart; have no fear; it is I." Take heart; have no fear; it is I.

My friends, if you ever have a moment when you are scared of life or death, when you are barely holding on, when you see a form, something, someone walking on your troubled waters, don't panic, don't fret, don't shiver in your fear . . . just look up, then listen for the voice of who that person is. Listen for His words: "Take heart, have no fear. It is I." . . . Say it with me: "Take heart, have no fear. It is I." . . . "Oh Lord, Thy sea is so great . . . any my boat is so small." For now

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