

## ANCHORS THAT HOLD

(11/15/09)

Scripture Lesson: Acts 27:13-44

*"They lowered four anchors from the back of the ship and prayed for daylight."*

These words come from the story of a shipwreck that took place almost two thousand years ago. We know of it today because one of the passengers on the ship was the apostle Paul, and the story of the shipwreck is found in the Book of Acts.

Paul was traveling on the ship as a prisoner bound for Rome. Paul had been arrested in Jerusalem two years before, not for breaking any civil law but merely for being a Christian. He spent the intervening two years in prison waiting to be tried before the emperor. Finally Paul found himself a member of a group of prisoners who were being sent under guard from Palestine to Italy.

From the beginning, the trip was beset with difficulties. The Roman centurion in charge of the prisoners found it difficult to obtain a direct passage to Italy. The best he could find was a ship bound for the Aegean.

When they arrived in Asia Minor, the centurion found a large grain carrier from Alexandria that was on its way to Rome. Although it was already late in the season, the owners of the ship, who were anxious to sell their cargo, wanted to reach Italy before winter. The centurion brought his prisoners on board and the ship set sail.

Things did not work out as they planned. Since the wind blew steadily from the wrong direction, the ship was forced to sail down toward the island of Cyprus. When at length the ship reached the island of Crete, it was apparent that they couldn't reach Italy before winter. They had to find a suitable harbor in which to anchor until spring.

The first harbor they came to was not well protected. In spite of Paul's warnings, they weighed anchor and set out again.

In this case, the folly of taking too great a chance was soon plain. What had begun as a gentle south wind soon turned into a terrible northeaster. The storm seized the ship and shook it. Soon the sails were in tatters and the gear was swept away. The

storm raged for days. With bearings lost, with no idea of their position or the direction in which they were being driven, the sailors and prisoners huddled together in fear.

In the distance they heard a sound that was even more ominous than the shrieking of the wind in the rigging – the booming of the surf on a lee shore. Immediately the leadsman sounded and found fifteen fathoms. The bottom was rapidly shelving up beneath them. They were bearing down on the land.

Since it was impossible to turn the ship around and sail it back into the teeth of the gale, only one thing could keep them from being dashed to death on the rocks. There were four anchors in the stern of the ship. They threw them overboard, one by one, praying that the anchors would dig into the ocean floor and hold the ship fast until morning. The anchors held. The storm eventually lifted. Not a single soul was lost.

In addition to giving us information about the life and travels of the apostle Paul, our scripture lesson leads us to think about how the course of history would have been different if the anchors had not held and if Paul had been lost in the storm. The story also contains a message for us, a message that ends with a note of hope.

I don't know if you have noticed, but life is not always smooth sailing. The world in which we live is passing through difficult times. Our nation is passing through difficult times. Many of us as individuals and families are passing through difficult times, through stormy seas, through deep and turbulent waters. There are times in our lives when, like the apostle Paul, it seems we are headed for the rocks, when the forces that shape our destiny seem to be beyond our control.

If we read the scripture passage in Acts not only historically, as a description of events in the past, but also as a psychological and spiritual teaching, we might think about the symbolism of the anchors that saved the ship from destruction. If we do this, we might discover that we, too, have anchors that we can throw out when we are caught in an inner or outer storm. These anchors, if they hold, can mean the difference between survival and disaster.

The first of our four saving anchors is light in weight. Although it will not hold indefinitely, it is a good one. **The first anchor is hope.** We utilize this anchor when, in the face of difficulties, we do not give up, we do not despair. We utilize this anchor when we remain optimistic, when we maintain a positive attitude toward life and toward our life, even with all its problems.

This is a very important anchor because many, if not most of our crises are of relatively short duration. The bitterest pains we bear are not permanent. Situations may seem overwhelming at the moment they arise, but because of this first anchor, we know that if we face into them, we will not only survive them, we will live through them, we will live beyond them, and we may even be transformed by them.

This first anchor, the anchor of hope, is the knowledge that it is always darkest before the dawn. This first anchor is the deep-seated conviction that no matter how dark the night may be, the day is bound to follow.

This anchor will not hold indefinitely. It may not be strong enough to take us through the longer, the more sustained crises of our life. The positive outlook of hope, and the staying power it produces, although very important, is not always enough.

The second anchor is heavier in weight, so it will hold longer. **This anchor is forged out of the caring and kindness of other people.**

Think of some of the major crises of your life, the big ones, the ones that threatened to break you. Can you remember someone who was there for you, who really, genuinely cared? Maybe this person didn't completely understand what you were going through. But this person loved you, felt your pain, and wanted to help carry your burden. Think about it. Think about some of the most difficult times in your life, and you may be able to remember that special person.

Maybe that special person was your husband or your wife. Maybe it was your minister or your AA sponsor or your psychotherapist. It also may have been a friend. Some of you just now were probably thinking of special friends who helped you through

the crises you were remembering -- friends who stood by you, who cared and supported and maybe even confronted or challenged you, who gave you both a hug and a kick in the rear when you needed it.

Adversity teaches us two lessons about our friends. The sad lesson is that some people we thought were our friends will let us down. They won't be there. They really don't care. Maybe they never did. Maybe we only thought they were our friends.

But the pain of this realization is more than balanced by the realization that other people, perhaps unexpected people, sometimes show a love and a loyalty and a level of sacrifice that is beyond what we had reason to expect. In the difficult times of our lives, some people will indeed disappoint us. Others will be there to touch us deeply with their love, caring, and concern. These are the people, the special friends we never forget.

The third anchor will hold longer than the anchor of optimism. It will hold us even during those times when other people aren't supportive, when they don't know what we're going through, when they don't understand or care.

There are some crises, some difficulties, some struggles of the soul that we need to go through alone. Not everything can be shared. Not everything should be shared. Sometimes we have to pick up our own cross; we have to suffer through our crucifixion alone, just as Jesus did, if new life is to emerge. **The third anchor, especially important in times like these, is grounded in our own inner resources and in a deep sense of meaning in our life.**

In his book, *Man's Search For Meaning*, the existential psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, survivor of the death camp experience at Auschwitz, describes his observations concerning which prisoners survived the experience and which did not. At first Frankl thought the physically strong and healthy would survive. He soon realized that there was no correlation between survival and physical health. The people who survived some of the most brutal, inhumane, sadistic conditions physically and psychologically

that people have ever had to endure were those who had a will to live that was grounded in a deep sense of meaning in their life.

In the death camp, if you had a transcendent sense of meaning to your life, if you had experienced and internalized the meaning of life in general and of your individual life, if you knew what life was about and what you were doing here, you could make it. Here is where Frankl's observations challenge us, especially if our goals in life are shallow and superficial and secular.

If you were in Auschwitz, and if you thought that life was about what Sigmund Freud called the "pleasure principle," about increasing pleasure and decreasing pain, if you thought the most important thing in life was to be secure and comfortable and successful and happy, then you were in serious trouble. You didn't stand a chance of making it through. The meaning of life is a lot deeper than this.

Maybe we don't see this clearly today because we are not in a death camp, because our goals and sense of meaning in life are not being tested in this way. However, the question remains. How shallow and superficial is our meaning in life? How much of our life is built around the search for pleasure and the attainment of secular standards of success? Do we have a sense of the deeper meaning of life?

These inner resources come from our religious faith. No one can give them to us. I don't care how many friends or ministers or therapists we have standing next to us. This third anchor has to come out of us. It is either there in a time of trial or it isn't. We need to do our work, step by step, day by day, to develop these inner resources -- a will to live, a sense of the meaning of life and of our life, a mature religious faith, and the ability to love if we are to transcend those situations that would destroy us. The answers aren't outside us, even in those we love.

This leads us to the fourth anchor. **The fourth anchor is the reality of God in our life -- steadfast, immovable, and eternal.** The sailors in the ship could not see the stars above the clouds, but the stars were there. In the midst of the turbulent waters

they did not forget that the bottom was solid, that there was something in which their anchors could take hold. The rock bottom grounding of our lives is the reality of God.

Because our lives are grounded in God, whether we realize it or not, there is a meaningfulness to the crises and tragedies of our lives. I believe that many of the difficult times, the storms of life, are God's will, but not in the sense that God is testing us or punishing us. The storms of our lives are not always, but are often of our own making. We suffer the consequences of our own wrong choices, of our cowardice in the face of the challenges of life, of our own fears of change, of our having wandered from the path, of our having betrayed our deepest values. It sometimes takes a full-blown storm, a major crisis to blast us out of the hole within which we have imprisoned ourselves, to halt our determined process down a dead-end street.

Think about some of the most difficult moments in your life. While you were in the middle of it, the crisis was confusing and painful. You just wished it would go away or stop hurting. But you somehow found the strength and the determination to face into it. You survived it. In fact, you grew through it, you emerged from it a very different person. Maybe you even went on to make some very important changes in your life. As you look back from where you are today, even if you had the opportunity to rewrite history, to change the past, you're not sure you would eliminate that painful struggle.

God's hand is often discernible in the stormy moments of our lives. God calls us out of Egypt time and time again, but he does so by first calling us, leading us, driving us into the wilderness. God calls us to death time and time again, to a lonely, painful crucifixion, as the only way that new life can emerge within us. God is not always working in the service of the "pleasure principle," intervening to take the crisis away, to take our pain away, though this is so often what we pray for.

I believe that God has a bigger plan for us and for our life, a plan that doesn't seem to have a lot to do with our being happy, healthy, comfortable, and successful. God's plan has a lot more to do with the shaping of our soul. I'm sure you won't have to

think too long to realize how some of the storms, the difficult times, even the tragedies of your life have shaped you to the very core, have shaped your very soul. God's hand may have been in those storms.

"They lowered four anchors from the stern and prayed for the daylight." The anchors held, and when the day came, the sailors and prisoners made their way ashore. Not a single life was lost.

**We have our anchors too, resources in time of need: the knowledge that it is always darkest before the dawn; the knowledge that there are special people who care; our own inner resources; and the reality of God as the rock and grounding of our life.** The life with anchors like these, anchors set deep in the rock, has nothing to fear from the storm. In fact, it may very well be the storm that sets us free. The storm is not to be feared or avoided, but entered into. It is the anchors we have that make the difference.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
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