

FOUR ANCHORS IN A STORM

(6/23/19)

Scripture Lesson: Acts 27:13-44

"Fearing that we might run on the rocks, they let down four anchors from the stern and prayed for day to come." (Acts 27:29)

This past week The Boston Globe ran an article on the soaring rates of teenage suicides in our country. According to a study by Harvard Medical School, from 2000 to 2017 the suicide rate rose by 47% among teens age 15-19, and it rose 36% among young people age 20-24. The study identified an increase of 14.2% in actual suicides of males age 15-19 from 2015 to 2017. That's a startling increase to have taken place in only two years! In 2017 alone 6,241 young people between the ages of 15 and 24 took their life.

Why is this so? Why are so many young people not only dropping out of a life that many of us see as a precious gift from God, but are actually opting to end this life? It is apparent that they are either in a state of intense and constant psychic pain, e.g., the pain of severe anxiety or depression, a pain that they wish to escape through death, or that life in some significant way is not meeting their expectations. "If this is what life is all about, I want nothing to do with it."

We speculate about the possible causes of this heartbreaking trend. It is obvious that our young people are living in a different world than the one in which we grew up. There are societal or sociological pressures that contribute to the epidemics of both suicide and drug abuse. However, as you might guess, although I am in favor of addressing some of these social factors—especially young people's easy access to guns and the availability of potent drugs like fentanyl that blur the line between overdose and suicide, I am more interested in providing them with the inner resources that they need to deal with life, to live in this world with all its opposites, with all its complexity, in a beautiful and constructive and meaningful way.

The questions that attend this study bring to mind a metaphor that is offered to us in the Book of Acts. It is the metaphor of the four anchors that helped the apostle Paul survive a storm at sea.

Let's recall the background to the scripture passage we heard this morning. Paul was traveling on a ship as a prisoner bound for Rome. He had been arrested in Jerusalem two years prior, not for breaking any law but merely for being a Christian. He had spent these two years in

prison waiting to be tried by 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. In spite of Paul's warnings, they weighed anchor and set out.

It soon became apparent that they had made a bad decision. 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.

I don't know if you have noticed, but life is not always smooth sailing. The world is passing through difficult times. Our nation is passing through difficult times. Many of us, including our young people, are passing through difficult times. There are times in our lives when the forces that shape our destiny seem to be beyond our control.

If we read the passage in Acts not only as history, but also as a psychological and spiritual teaching, we are drawn to the symbolism of the anchors that saved the ship from destruction. It leads us to consider whether we, too, have anchors that we can utilize when we find ourselves

caught up in an inner or outer storm. These anchors, if they hold, can mean the difference between survival and disaster, between choosing life and choosing death.

Let me suggest four possible anchors.

The first of our four life-saving anchors is relatively 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 maintain a positive attitude toward life and toward our life, even with all its problems, with all its pain and sorrow.

This is an important anchor because most of our crises are of relatively short duration. The bitterest pains we bear are not permanent. Situations may seem overwhelming when 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 and we may even be transformed by them. Unfortunately, our young people do not always have a realistic sense of time and the relative transiency of crises; they do not have the perspective that we have, a perspective that comes from a lifetime of experience.

This first anchor, the anchor of hope, is the knowledge that it is always darkest before the dawn. It reminds us that no matter how dark the night may be, the day is bound to follow. If our young people could discover the deep truth in these adages, it could prove the difference between life and death.

The anchor of hope will not hold indefinitely. It may not be strong enough to take us through the more sustained crises of our life or help us deal with painful chronic conditions. A positive attitude and a hope that conditions will improve, although important, are sometimes not enough.

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

Think of some of the major crises of your life. Can you remember someone who was there for you, someone who cared? Maybe this person didn't completely understand what you were going through, but this person loved you and wanted to help share your burden. Think about 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 pastor or your AA sponsor or your psychotherapist. It may have been a friend who stood by you, who

supported and maybe even challenged you when you needed it. My hope is that our young people realize that there *are* people who care: teachers, guidance counselors, pastors, friends, *even parents*—and reach out to them before they make ill-advised and irreversible decisions.

Our outer resources are important, but 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 cross and 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 a will to live and in a deep sense of meaning, a transcendent sense of meaning in our life.**

In *Man's Search For Meaning*, the existential psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, survivor of the death camp at Auschwitz, describes his observations concerning which prisoners survived the death camp and which did not. Frankl initially thought that 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 inhumane conditions that people have ever had to endure were those who had a will to live and a deep sense of meaning in their life.

In Auschwitz, if you had a transcendent sense of meaning in your life, if you had experienced and internalized the meaning of life in general and of your individual life in particular, you could make it—even against all odds.

In Auschwitz, if you thought that life was about what 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.

We realize this when we, like the young people who were described in the study, have our goals and our meaning in life tested. The adversities of life shine a spotlight on how shallow and superficial our meaning in life may be. They lead us to reflect on the extent to which our life is built around the search for pleasure and the attainment of secular standards of success.

The inner resources of the third anchor give rise to psychological health and resiliency. Our parents, our teachers, our friends may have helped us forge and internalize these qualities, but in the last analysis they have to come out of us. They are grounded in an honest and searching self-reflection, in setting aside a childish or narcissistic outlook on life in order to grow

into a mature and maturing sense of the meaning of life and of our life. These inner resources give us the strength, the resiliency to survive, to transcend those situations that threaten to destroy us.

This leads us to the fourth anchor. **The fourth anchor is the reality of God and God's steadfast love.** The sailors in the ship could not see the stars above the clouds, but the stars were there. In the midst of the storm 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.

When our life is grounded in God, a crisis can actually become a meaningful part of our spiritual journey. We need to realize that some, perhaps many of the storms in our life are of our own making. We suffer the consequences of our wrong choices, of our cowardice in the face of the challenges of life, of our fear of change, of our having betrayed our deepest values. It sometimes takes a powerful storm to turn our life around, to halt our determined process down a dead-end street.

Think about one of the 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. But you somehow found the strength and the determination to face into it. You survived it. In fact, you grew through it, and you emerged a different person. Maybe you even went on to make important changes in your life. As you look back from where you are today, even if you had the opportunity to rewrite history, you're not sure you would eliminate that painful struggle.

When we turn to God in prayer during the stormy times of our life, we can feel a sense of presence. God calls us out of bondage in Egypt time and time again, but God does so first by calling us, leading us, driving us into the wilderness. God calls us to death time and time again as the only way that new life can emerge. God is not working in the service of the pleasure principle, intervening to remove the crisis, to take our pain away, though this is often our prayer.

God has a bigger plan 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 struggles, even the tragedies of your life have shaped you to the core, have shaped your soul.

God's hand may have been in those storms, and God's presence and guidance may have helped you survive them.

"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 that we can draw from in time of need: (1) the stubborn staying power of hope; (2) the awareness that there are people who care; (3) a will to live and a sense of a life that is deeply meaningful; and (4) the reality of God as the rock and grounding of our life. The life with anchors like these has nothing to fear from the storm.

Unfortunately, I have no idea how our young people will come to discover this deep truth about life, how they will develop the anchors they need to survive the storms of life that they already face and that they will face throughout all the seasons of their life, when they never set foot within a church, synagogue, temple, or mosque.

My hope, my prayer is that our young people will somehow discover that the storms of life, the inner and outer storms which they mistakenly believe make life not worth living, may actually lead them to the very deepest kind of growth, may actually shape their soul. My hope, my prayer is that they will somehow discover and then utilize the anchors that can keep them from being dashed against the rocks, the anchors that can help them survive the disillusionments of life, the anchors that can actually set them free to live life fully and joyfully, to live the life that God intends for them and for all of us.

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