



New Hope Sermon – Sometimes, Shipwreck is God’s Way of Saving Us

Sam Lau, 8/12/18

Hello friends! It is very significant for me to be up here today and speak to you. Many of you have encouraged me in my gifts as a teacher, leader, brother, friend; and so you are naturally eager to hear me today. I do not doubt your sincerity or the truth of your words, as I, too, am aware of the calling God has given me, but I come today with some hesitation because my entire message will be about my complete powerlessness to do anything in my hour of greatest need. This is not a preacher’s sermon; it is more like a survivor’s confession, a personal witness to the philosophical wrestling I’ve had with God.

Before I begin, I want to give a brief overview of my life the last several years, as it is relevant to my message. When I first joined the New Hope community a year ago, I was in the midst of a mental and emotional breakdown. Prior to that, I had spent five years doing student ministry in Canada with Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship - five years that were full of hardship and ended really badly. I came to Wheaton in 2015, found new energy in pouring myself into my studies, my newfound work with Wheaton Residence Life, and new friendships and relationships. And although there was much that fed me through this time, by the middle of 2017, I was in turmoil over a friendship that had broken down, saying goodbye to many friends I had made in grad school, and feeling overwhelmed by all that lay ahead of me academically, professionally, and spiritually. When a few more stressful events took place during those summer months, I just broke down.

Henri Nouwen, who went through a similarly dark and bleak period in his life, describes it better than I could: “Just when all those around me were assuring me they loved me, cared for me, appreciated me, even admired me, I experienced myself as a useless, unloved, and despicable person. Just when people were putting their arms around me, I saw the endless depth of my human misery and felt that there was nothing worth living for. Just when I was being praised for my spiritual insights, I felt devoid of faith. Just when people were thanking me for bringing them closer to God, I felt that God had abandoned me. The anguish completely paralyzed me. Within me there was one long scream coming from a place I didn’t know existed, a place full of demons.” Despite the fact that I had myself been used by God to bring spiritual and emotional healing to others, I felt powerless to do anything for myself.

New Hope became part of a vast support network that was, by God’s grace, provided for me during this most challenging period of my life. I did everything one could humanly do to “get better”. I went on medication, went to therapy, ate healthy, got exercise, saw a spiritual director, leaned on friends and family, journaled consistently, quit my job, changed my academic schedule—there wasn’t a stone unturned in my search for healing.

I do not wish to disparage the great help that I've received from so many people, and the contributions of psychology, counseling, medicine, and spiritual guidance—but, I faced the very real fear that I would not be able to hold on in my struggle, even though by outward appearances I was making good progress in my recovery. And honestly, even though I am mostly recovered, and I can tell you all the things I did in that process, I cannot really say—with anything approaching certainty or confidence—why I was able to do those things before it was too late. If this sounds scary, it's because it is. But more than being frightful, it is mysterious.

As Parker Palmer says: "...depression demands that we reject simplistic answers, both "religious" and "scientific", and learn to embrace mystery. Mystery surrounds every experience of the human heart: the deeper we go into the heart's darkness or light, the closer we get to the ultimate mystery of God. Mysteries never yield to solutions or fixes—and when we pretend that they do, life becomes not only more banal but also more hopeless, because the fixes never work."

Throughout this journey, I had, as my guide, one of the most prevalent symbols in scripture: the sea, and the waters; waters that both give life and threaten death. In Genesis 1:1 we are told that creation itself began with the Spirit of God hovering over the waters, bringing order out of the chaos. In the Exodus, the Spirit of God parts the waters of the Red Sea so that His people can escape; these same people had to cross the waters of the Jordan to enter the Promised Land. Jonah ran away from God on the sea, and it was the sea that God used to bring him back. Some of the most noteworthy experiences for the disciples in their three years with Jesus took place on the Sea of Galilee, when they feared for their lives in the midst of the most terrible storms. And the book of Acts—that heroic record of the missionary efforts of the apostles and the early church—finishes with the harrowing tale of shipwreck that Paul endured on his way to Rome. And of course, the very act of initiation into the Christian faith is immersion into the waters, where we die to our old selves and are reborn from those same waters. We call this baptism.

What is a storm? What is our ship? In life, things happen that shake us, stretch us, break us. These trying circumstances are the storms of life, and they range from brisk afternoon thunderstorms to category 5 hurricanes. To get us through these storms, we all have a ship. Our ships consist of many things: our faith, our relationships, our passions, our hobbies, our careers, our ministries, our goals and dreams for the future, our money and belongings. More than anything, it is our ego, that protective shell of identity we've constructed around ourselves as we've grown up. This collection of spiritual, psychological, emotional, and relational resources constitute our ship, and when the big storms hit, our ship is everything. It may take a beating, and need the occasional repair, but we have faith it will see us through the storm. It better, because the alternative is too frightening to contemplate, and if the unthinkable does happen, and our ship is broken beyond repair, we will find ourselves shipwrecked, stripped of all that has protected us, and at the mercy of the cold, black sea. It is not for nothing that we do all we can to avoid such a situation, but as any sailor will tell you, if you spend enough time on the water, something will go wrong. And if you live long enough in this broken world, despite your best efforts and best intentions to do the right thing and avoid suffering, things will fall apart. Cars will crash, marriages will crumble, loved ones will get cancer, hearts will break. To believe that you will get through life without some kind of shipwreck, is, at best, naïve.

I've spoken at length about my own unfortunate circumstances, and how they led me to my personal shipwreck. I would like now to use the remaining time to share some of the lessons learned and, most importantly, how it has impacted God's place in my life.

Lesson number one: responsibility and acceptance. I have paired these two together because I believe that they are inseparably linked. Acceptance is facing reality for what it is; in any addiction counseling it is the first step. One needs to recognize that there is a problem before one can do anything about it. Shipwreck forced me to stop pretending that my issues were manageable, or that things were okay as they were. It forced me to confront my own pain, my own grief, my own sins, my own vulnerabilities and limitations. It forced me to confront just how deeply rooted my sins really were. But even more than facing my inner demons, responsibility is accepting that whatever the causes of my situation, whether they be because of me, others, God, or Satan; I, and only I, am the one who can decide how I choose to respond. It is giving up the complaint that things should be different than they are and letting go of anything that is a hindrance to healing and growth. It is accepting reality as it is and not as I believe it should be.

Lesson number two: reality is frightening, unpredictable, and you are not exempt from the chaos, and not only that, but at root, we are all completely powerless to guarantee anything. Once I had taken the steps to take responsibility for my own sins, my own choices, and my own issues, I discovered that although that helped me to accept my circumstances and soothe some of the pain; all the psychological and theological insight, and all the valuable work in getting in touch with my pain could not shake the existential crisis I faced. Is the universe a safe place? Can God be trusted? Does God really love me? All illusions of control or order were shattered. As the book of Job testifies so powerfully, one can check all the right boxes but still end up, forgive my language, totally screwed. Deep down, we all believe that if I just did this one thing, or collection of things; if I just had this in my life, or had a strong enough faith, or strong enough philosophy, or a strong enough psychological tool box, we would be okay. In our search for order, we look for a system to explain why some suffer and some don't, why some end up with a good life and others don't. As Christians we are especially prone to this kind of thinking, but this merely reveals our unconscious need to reassure ourselves we are not like the suffering souls before us. But the truth about the sea and the chaos is that there are no explanations. The error of Job's friends, and of so many of us, is in trying to give any explanation at all. Shipwreck caused me to acknowledge my helplessness as a finite, limited creature, at pains to control or explain anything, just like everyone else.

Lesson number three: It is in facing this complete nothingness that we can begin to truly have faith in God alone and live in true freedom. If we are honest with ourselves, there is something, or a collection of things, that we hold onto in life, such that if it were to be taken from us, we would not be able to live. Not only that, but if we were to lose it, or if that specific tragedy were to befall us, we would not be able to believe in a good God anymore. Maybe it's a relationship, a loved one, a material thing, a career or a ministry. Or it could be something less tangible, like your self-respect, your success, your ego. And again, if we're being totally honest, we would pray that God would spare us the test of faith it would be to lose that thing, and often we don't even know what that is until we lose it. As for me, even though I'm not sure it was any one thing in particular, I lost that thing, and had to endure that test. And yet I discovered, even as I became more dependent on others than ever before, that I don't actually need as much as I thought I needed.

I also learned that I needed to give up the childish attitude that says, “If you don’t give me what I want you don’t love me.” It’s amazing how deeply rooted this attitude is in our hearts, but the upside of finally confronting it and letting it go is that it opens the door to truly knowing God’s love for you, if you let Him do the hard work in your heart. Shipwreck stripped me of everything I had in life that might have been a substitute for God, and led me back to the source of all things in God. Shipwreck stripped me down to where the only thing, the only person I could cling to was Jesus. And not a Jesus made in my image, a domesticated Jesus that conveniently conforms to my will but rather the Jesus that is asking me, “is having faith—or expressing trust—to insist on a particular outcome? Or is it to ask yourself the question, since this is what IS, what is the invitation here, right now? What is God doing right now?”

And what God was doing in my life was showing me that ultimately, where my focus needs to be was neither on the storm nor my ship, but on He who is the creator of heaven and earth, the one who walks over the wind and the waves, He who is at home in the chaos because he fashioned creation out of it.

Leanne Payne, who went through her own shipwreck, puts it best: “I am personally grateful that the circumstances of my early adult life, though extremely painful at the time, brought me to the place of seeking the face of the Lord with all my heart. The ship in which I moved through life had foundered on jagged, sharp shoals, and I was left no doubt whatsoever of my need for a Savior, one who would remain with me, uniting His eternal life and fullness of being to my creaturely finiteness, immaturity and incompleteness. Although by nature optimistic, I no longer cherished naïve illusions about the benignancy of the world, or about my natural capacity to make my way through it.” With the help of the Spirit, I too have begun rebuilding my ship, but even though I feel more confident about its seaworthiness, I know that no ship is foolproof, there can always be a bigger, more violent storm. Therefore my eyes are on the One who walks upon the waters. If God is the one who brings creation out of chaos, what do we ultimately have to be afraid of? Not even shipwreck. Not even losing everything.

Finally, we recognize that Christian hope is not that the sea can be survived because we build a stronger ship or we find better ways to predict coming storms, but that it will one day be eliminated. The Bible ends with John’s vision of the renewal and redemption of all things: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.” Five words that say everything, “the sea was no more”. The world to come will not be marked by ambiguity and chaos. Instead, the One who brooded over the waters from the beginning will bring creation to its completed end, where every tear will be wiped from our eyes. We have a faith that does not teach us optimism, but hope instead, a hope grounded in the only One who deserves such hope and trust, our Creator and our Savior.