

Sermon – On Rising Above

Psalm 105: 1-6, Matthew 14: 22-35

Sometimes when we're going through a rough patch, there are instructions we can follow. For example, the new pastor was arriving as the former pastor was leaving the church building. They shook hands, and the former pastor said, "I hope all goes well. In case it doesn't, my last act as pastor here was leaving you two envelopes in the desk drawer. Just follow the instructions."

For quite some time then everything went well for the new pastor, but three years later it began to fall apart. People started to complain and gripe and grumble about this and that, which was when she remembered that the former pastor had left her instructions. So, she goes to the desk and pulls out the first envelope. It says, "Blame the former pastor." And she does. "The reason things are a mess is that my predecessor didn't take care of business." And it works just fine. People think about it and say, "Yeah, it's the other pastor's fault."

And so once again things went swimmingly for the new pastor, but after another couple of years people again grumbled, complained, and criticized. Remembering how well the former pastor's first advice had worked, she opens the desk in the study and pulls out the second envelope. It says, "Prepare two envelopes."

The word Remember is an important word in the Bible. In the NRSV it is used 212 times, which is a lot in comparison to other important words. One way in

which it is used is to address God's people when they are enduring hardship, facing trials, or experiencing oppression. When they fear that it's all over, that they can't go on, someone stands up and says, "Remember, O Israel, what God has done in the past to get us this point in time. Will not God help us keep going?" And the people remember, give thanks, and trust in God to get them through whatever is besetting them. Theirs is not to panic or give up. Theirs is to be faithful.

Such remembering is what we have in our first scripture reading today, "Remember the wonderful works God has done." In fact, throughout the forty-five verses of Psalm 105, the people remember God's faithfulness to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God's faithfulness as God worked through Joseph in Egypt. They remember how Israel was enslaved in Egypt, but then how God used Moses and Aaron to bring the people out and give them life in Canaan. By engaging in such remembrance as they worship time and time again over the years, the people affirm their identity and are strengthened to continue their journey.

I was watching the series *Outlanders* a while back, a series about Scots and English who then came to America. Jaimie and Claire are the main characters in *Outlanders*, and Claire truly goes through a horrible experience. It is almost unimaginable how bad it was. A time later, she says to herself, "Given what has happened to me I should be shattered. But I refuse to be." To borrow a word from

Claire, by the grace or support of God, followers of Jesus are a people who refuse to be “shattered,” and God patches us up at times by remembering.

And if there is one story to remember, in my opinion, it is our second scripture lesson for today. Jesus tells the disciples to get in a boat and go on ahead to the other side of Lake Galilee, about which we know, but they didn't know at the time, is the lowest freshwater body of water on earth at 600 feet below sea level. And because of its low-lying position in the rift valley, surrounded by hilly land masses, Lake Galilee is prone to sudden, violent storms. Over the ages, streams have cut deep ravines into these hills, and the ravines act as natural wind funnels. As warm air rises, especially around sunset, cool air rushes in from the ravines to replace it. The result is that the tranquil lake, some 13 miles long and 7 miles wide at its widest, can be whipped into a white-capped sea of angry six-foot waves in a matter of minutes.

So there the disciples are, their little boat suddenly battered by the waves. They're getting farther and farther away from where they should be arriving on land, rather than nearer – the wind is also against them – when Jesus comes to BOTH them and to us. How? Walking on the stuff that can sink our boat. We're caught up in one of the storms of life that threaten our very wellbeing, but he's above it. It doesn't get him down, and he helps us continue our journey. Is this something to remember or what? Jesus walks on the chaos which can possibly

wreck our lives and helps us make it safely to the other side. And should our faith falter and we begin to sink, he reaches out and catches our hand.

And not only do we have stories from the Bible like this one to remember, but we have stories from our own lives to remember. Stories of how God has kept us going as opposed to allowed us to sink. Some time ago a fellow who knew me back when said, “You ought to tell the story about your voice more so than you do, which is never. Those of us who went through it with you still remember.”

Well, okay, here’s a story that I can remember if needs be. In 1992 I was the pastor of Sandia Presbyterian. A couple of years earlier, a handful of us had successfully used a program called The Phone’s for You to let people know that we were starting a new congregation. By the end of ’92 we were in our own building, and the handful of us had grown to the point that our new building was already maxed out. It was a busy, joyous time, when one morning during the sermon my voice became raspy. The raspyness came and went over a period of a few weeks until all of a sudden, I couldn’t get a word out.

I went to otolaryngologists here in Albuquerque who didn’t have clue as to what was wrong. I worked with a speech therapist whose techniques helped a bit but not enough. Finally, I came across an article in a magazine about a voice malady that might be me and went to the Mayo Clinic in Scottsdale, where there were doctors who knew about this problem. I was evaluated and, yes, I had

spasmodic dysphonia, the adductor or most common form. With adductor spasmodic dysphonia, there is a disconnect between one's brain and one's vocal cords; thus, the cords don't open and close as they should. The vocal cords slam together, stick together, stiffen and spasm, making it difficult for them to vibrate and produce sounds. One's voice is what is called strangled as one tries to speak. It sounds like you're being strangled.

And you know how just getting a diagnosis after a year or more of being in the dark can make a person feel better? Well, it did make me feel better for a time. But even today the cause of spasmodic dysphonia is unknown and there is no really good treatment. Celebrities who have this condition include Jeff Puges on CBS, although he has abductor whereas I have adductor, and Diane Rehm, who long had a talk program on NPR, who has the same kind of SD I do. I used to listen to her grind out her words. She is one determined lady.

So, I would go to the Mayo Clinic every eight weeks, get an injection of botox in each vocal cord, which sounds far worse than it really is, and return to my position as pastor at Sandia. In the first couple of weeks of this cycle I was very breathy. E.g. instead of slamming together, my vocal cords, drunk on botox, just lollygagged over at the side of my voice box. Then my voice was a bit better for four weeks, but then my voice would strangle once again, and I'd fly back to Scottsdale.

Time and time again that was my experience, and I became discouraged. It was so difficult to get a word out that my neck grew from 16 ½ inches to 18 ½ due to the exertion. And telephoning was a nightmare. For some reason, people with spasmodic dysphonia just can't use the phone. And as the botox built up in my vocal cords, my voice got weaker and weaker. I could be sitting at a round table of six to eight people enjoying a meal, and the person next to me couldn't hear me speak above the ambient noise. So, I knew I was going to have to leave the ministry, but because everything else, other than my voice, was working so well, I dragged my feet. Leaving the ministry was a decision I kept putting off. And then one day, a pediatrician who had recently joined the congregation came up to me.

“You're really having a hard time, aren't you?” she said. “Well, here's an idea. I once worked with a doctor in Tennessee. With some patients, rather than injecting both cords with the usual dose of botox, he would put a massive dose in only one cord. Leave the other alone. And it really helped some of them. Why not try it?”

A few weeks later it was time for my every-eight-weeks botox injection at the Mayo, and so I asked the doctors there if they would try this other method. They agreed to put the usual combined dose, but no more, into one cord and leave the other cord alone. I said okay, and that was my last botox injection. I am not cured, I'm in remission. My voice still catches and strangulates, especially on the phone,

but not like it once did. It's hard for me to get my voice going at times after I've been silent. Some days my voice is much worse than others, terribly hoarse or not much more than a whisper. Some days I'm truly ready to take a vow of silence and join a monastery. Cheri would have to come with me, though, and I can't find any coed monasteries. Even on my best days I have little volume to my voice compared to what I once did. I would love to have my pre-1992 voice back, but by God's grace I've had enough of a voice to continue in the ministry for the past thirty years. So, that's my story and my vocal cords are sticking to it.

And I would imagine that many of you have stories of how by the grace of God you or a family member or a friend or an acquaintance have risen above difficulty. Add all of these to the stories in the Bible and to the accounts of church history through the ages, and the word "Remember" is a key word for going into the future. Remember what God has done for our Biblical ancestors, and also what God has done in our lives and in the lives of others we know. Won't God continue to do these sorts of things in the future to help keep us going? And of all the stories, certainly remember the disciples in that little storm-tossed boat on Lake Galilee. For there Jesus is walking on the stuff that can sink our boat, saying "Take heart, it is I: do not be afraid." Amen