

## WHAT THE WISE CONSIDER

### Psalm 107:23-32, 43

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on the Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time, November 5, 2017, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.*

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*Some went down to the sea in ships,  
doing business on the mighty waters;  
they saw the deeds of the Lord,  
his wondrous works in the deep.*

*For he commanded and raised the stormy wind,  
which lifted up the waves of the sea.  
They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths;  
their courage melted away in their calamity;  
they reeled and staggered like drunkards,  
and were at their wits' end.*

*Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,  
and he brought them out from their distress;  
he made the storm be still,  
and the waves of the sea were hushed.  
Then they were glad because they had quiet,  
and he brought them to their desired haven.*

*Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love,  
for his wonderful works to humankind.  
Let them extol him in the congregation of the people,  
and praise him in the assembly of the elders.*

...

*Let those who are wise give heed to these things,  
and consider the steadfast love of the Lord.*

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For five out of the last eight years, Maggie and I have spent part of our summer vacation on Swan's Island, Maine, an island about halfway up the state, off Acadia National Forest. The island is home to 330 people year round, nearly all of whom earn their living harvesting lobsters from the sea, as did their forebears who settled the island in the 1700s. Another six or seven hundred people join in July and August – the only real months of summer – but many of these “summer” people have family connections to those who live year round. A handful have fine summer homes, but not many.

On the last night this past summer, the Swan's Island Lobster and Marine Museum – a collection of old lobster artifacts and equipment in a small house near the dock – sponsored a talk by one of the retired lobstermen recounting stories from “the days of old.” We had spoken with this man and his wife in the pew next to us at church, in the one store the island has, and in the library to which we retreated every day to connect to Wi-Fi and – for some reason – to check on the news from the world.

Maggie and I were the last people to arrive at the museum. When they saw us get out of our car, it was obvious they held up the start of the program until we got into the building, signed in, and walked through the crowd to the standing room section in the back, all eyes following our journey.

What struck me about the evening was that of 150 or so people crowded into the three rooms of the museum, nearly everyone was a local, an islander, a year-round resident. It appeared that these folks had come out on one of the final evenings of summer to hear stories they had undoubtedly heard before, from someone they had undoubtedly known virtually all their lives. Surely there was “nothing new under the sun,”<sup>1</sup> but they had come to listen as if the sun were rising for the first time. Though the sea was all most of them had ever known, it had not lost its power to give birth to stories worth hearing and hearing again.

## I.

Precisely halfway through the 43 verses of Psalm 107 – our Psalm selection for this Sunday – the psalmist turns his attention to the sea. The turn seems sudden and unexpected. In the first twenty-two verses of the psalm, which we did not read, the psalmist has praised God for God’s deliverance of people who have been driven from their land as refugees. The psalmist has praised God for bringing out of darkness and gloom those who have been imprisoned. And the psalmist has praised God for healing people whose illnesses have drawn them near to the gates of death. So when the psalmist turns his attention to people who

...who go down to the sea in ships,  
doing business on the mighty waters...

it seems a bit curious. Why go from scenes of human suffering and rescue to scenes of those drawn to what Melville calls “the watery part of the world”?<sup>2</sup> Why move from refugees and prisoners and people terminally ill to those who “go down to the sea in ships”?

The psalmist’s interest in seafaring is consistent with artists throughout the ages.

- The psalmist’s words inspired the opening words to *Moby Dick*: “Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth...I account it high time to get to the seas as soon as I can...”
- It inspired British poet John Masefield to write:

I must go down to the seas again,  
For the call of the running tide  
Is a wild call and a clear call  
That may not be denied.<sup>3</sup>

- It inspired both Henry Purcell<sup>4</sup> (1659-1695) and Herbert Sumison<sup>5</sup> (1899-1965) to write anthems two centuries apart, both entitled: “They that go down to the sea in ships....”

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<sup>1</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:9.

<sup>2</sup> Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*. Chapter 1, written in 1851,

<sup>3</sup> John Masefield (1878-1967), “Sea Fever,” published in 1926, available at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/54932/sea-fever-56d235e0d871e>.

<sup>4</sup> Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ssyPAUfj2V0>.

<sup>5</sup> Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5JZTp5XUm6k>.

The psalmist is clear that what initially attracts him is the sheer beauty – indeed, the spiritual experience – of seafaring.

*They see the deeds of the Lord,  
God's wondrous works in the deep.  
For God commands and raises the stormy wind  
Which lifts up the waves of the sea.*

Though Maggie and I have yet to venture out in a lobster boat – me being the hesitant one! – one reason we go to this island is the sheer beauty it provides of the sea.

- From the upstairs bedroom of the house we rent, the sun rises over the bay as the boats go out every morning.
- We walk to the lighthouse where we observe the sun slowly set behind the islands in the distance while the lighthouse bell clangs.
- We drive to rocky beaches which on every side of the island provide expansive views of the blue waters of the Atlantic and the timeless sound of wave on rock.

Like the psalmist, we feel we “mount up to heaven.”

Over the years, it is not just sea and land that provide us beauty. We have also encountered people whose lives exhibit the quiet beauty of their surroundings.

- An empty nest couple who left their highly paid professional lives in the Connecticut suburbs to move to the island, buy its one general store, deliver every package which comes onto the island, make certain every prescription finds the patient for whom it was prescribed, order special food for summer residents with expensive tastes and island residents with restricted diets, and simply be the community hub the island needs.
- In the small church we attend, we have observed a short, stocky man, about my age, sit in a pew near the front, attached to his oxygen tank, his service animal nearby at his feet. The man remains seated for the hymns, and whenever the labor of breathing panics him, he pets the service dog on the back of the neck and his breathing calms. So does ours.
- Twice we have been greeted at the door by a thin – no, gaunt – usher in the same overalls he wore the prior summer – who looks down at his feet when he hands us a bulletin, but who, when the minister calls him forward to read the scripture, carries his black Bible down the aisle, stands tall behind the pulpit, looks the congregation in the eye, and recites with deliberate diction the language of King James.

*Some [who] go down to the sea in ships  
See the deeds of the Lord,  
God's wondrous works in the deep.*

## II.

But just as the psalmist expresses that the sea can lift us on its waves so near to heaven that we can almost touch the face of God, the psalmist also narrates that our return to the surface of the sea often occurs with a crash.

*Some [who] go down to the sea in ships  
... go down to the depths.  
...their courage melts away in their calamity;  
they reel and stagger like drunkards,  
and their wisdom leaves them.<sup>6</sup>*

This summer we noticed handmade signs along the main road indicating that a restaurant had opened on the island, something that had been missing for several years. One evening we followed the signs to a distant corner of the island where down a gravel road we found a small, frame house, with a front porch, tables and chairs set up in the yard, and kitchen equipment visible on one side of the porch.

A thirteen year old boy greeted us in black slacks and a white shirt.

As he walked us from our car to the porch, we asked where the restrooms were. “My dad and I don’t have any restrooms for customers,” he said.

We sat down anyway.

The boy’s father came out, a gentle, bearded man in a white apron, a bit younger than us. He told us the three types of crepes on the menu, took our order, and when he brought us our crepes, as we were the only customers, he sat down at the table with us, his son seated on a bench nearby.

When we told him we were ministers (always a mistake), he shared that he was an Anglican priest, no longer serving a church, recently divorced, the father of five children, the youngest of whom was our *maitre-de*. He had visited the island in the fall, seen the house for sale, bought it outright with the divorce settlement he had received, paying an amount smaller for the sale of the house than we in this region make as down payments. “I came here to heal,” he said, “to start over.”

When he served me a desert crepe he poured homemade maple syrup on it, and I noticed a dead fly had appeared. He apologized, lifted it out with the edge of a knife. I said, “Don’t worry about it.” I still gave him a large tip. We took his son to the movie at the library, then drove him home asleep, and delivered him once again to his father.

I don’t know if the man and his crepes will make it through another cold winter there.

*Some [who] go down to the sea in ships  
... go down to the depths.*

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Later in the week, despite living in Washington and being saturated with the divisiveness of our politics, we went to a Town Hall meeting, not the kind with which we have become familiar in which citizens come out to shout down their local House Member or Senator, but rather a New England Town Hall where the citizens vote on recommendations from their local Board of Selectmen.

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<sup>6</sup> This is based on a translation by Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 27.

It seems that Swan's Island, like many rural counties in our country, has a growing opioid problem. A few years ago they hired their first resident sheriff, pay him a salary, provide him and his family with an apartment they fixed up over the Post Office. In the years since he was hired, his three children have grown but the apartment has not. So the Selectmen, which despite its name, does contain women, proposed to the citizens that they add a bit to their property taxes to expand the apartment for the sheriff and his family.

By televised Town Hall standards, the meeting was civil; but beneath the surface, it wasn't. Some of the debate got personal, some accusatory. The sheriff and his wife and children were present and spoke. For the second year in a row the proposal to expand the apartment was voted down, by a clear majority.

I suppose next summer if we return there will either be a new sheriff or no sheriff at all, and in either case I imagine there will still be opioids. The solutions for which we turn to politics seem stuck at so many levels, so many places, in our country, in our world.

*Some [who] go down to the sea in ships  
... go down to the depths.*

The human condition, wherever we go.

### III.

After presenting both height and depth, both bane and blessing, the psalmist affirms a theme he repeats over and over:

*...they cry to the Lord in their trouble,  
And he brings them out from their distress;*

Just as God will do for Jonah a few books later and just as Christ will do in the New Testament:<sup>7</sup>

*God makes the storm be still  
And the waves of the sea are hushed.*

This promise is given to all who go down to the sea. It is given to us who remain on land.

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I wish I could say that every wave returns to the sea before it does damage, that every storm is stilled before it becomes destructive, that every disease is stopped short before it claims its first victim. I wish I could say that that every international crisis will end before the words are spoken that cannot be taken back, before the first sword is drawn, the first bomb dropped.

But you know that I cannot make that promise. And neither does the psalmist. But in a psalm that is both eloquent and realistic about the heights and depths we experience as human beings, the psalmist closes with these words:

*Let those who are wise give heed to these things;  
And consider the steadfast love of the Lord.*

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<sup>7</sup> Mark 4:35-41, et al.

My friends, even when our lives are marked by multiple tragedies and loss, by sustained grief and intractable situations, even when our times are uncertain and our memories the only pleasure we have, there is the promise that if we will stand back and look at all of creation, at all of history, at all of what God has done – what we in our wisdom – our steering of our ship through the waters<sup>8</sup> – can consider and give heed is “the steadfast love of the Lord.” It is that love that prevails – in our history, in our lives, beyond our lives – as we live in *our* day and await *that* day when the wave lifts us gently to heaven, leaves us at its doorstep, and returns to earth.

*Let those who are wise give heed to these things:*

- A man calmed by petting his service dog
- An usher looking people in the eye as he reads the word of the Lord
- Maple syrup, cleansed by the edge of the knife, pure as communion wine.

*Let those who are wise give heed to these things,  
And consider the steadfast love of the Lord.*

Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> One of the basic meanings of wisdom in the Old Testament is “steering the ship.” See Alter 27.