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3 Lent, Year B
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1 Corinthians 1:18-25

18For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." 20Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. 22For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, 23but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

I share with you one of the oldest and well-worn stories in a preacher's playbook. You probably have heard a variation.

A man was stuck on his rooftop in a flood. He was praying to God for help.

Soon another person in a rowboat came by and shouted to the man on the roof, "Jump in, I can save you."

The stranded man shouted back, "No, it's OK, I'm praying to God, and he is going to save me."

So, the rowboat went on.

Then a motorboat came by. "The person in the motorboat shouted, "Jump in, I can save you."

To this the stranded man said, "No thanks, I'm praying to God, and he is going to save me. I have faith."

So, the motorboat went on.

Then a helicopter came by, and the pilot shouted down, "Grab this rope and I will lift you to safety."

To this the stranded man again replied, "No thanks, I'm praying to God, and he is going to save me. I have faith."

So, the helicopter reluctantly flew away.

Soon the water rose above the rooftop and the man drowned. He went to Heaven. He finally got his chance to discuss this whole situation with God, at which point he exclaimed, "I had faith in you, but you didn't save me, you let me drown. I don't understand why!"

To this God replied, "I sent you a rowboat and a motorboat and a helicopter, what more did you expect?"

Why is that old story retold so often? For one, I think it points us to some truth. We all have likely asked God for something or someone over the course of our lives. Petition, after all, is form of prayer. We ask for help, patience, wisdom, forgiveness, a new job, the birth of a healthy baby, and the healing of a broken relationship. And it's likely that we have not always seen or known how -- or if -- God listens and acts. And there is clearly a risk and limit to a belief in a God who acts only like a genie in a bottle granting wishes. When we ask God to save us or come to our help, what happens when that help doesn't come in the form we had hoped? Or as soon as we would have liked?

The other reason that old story continues to be told is that stories of survival have long captivated imaginations and conjured up our inner most fears of not knowing how we might fare out in the wilderness, left alone, or injured, washed out to sea on a ride tide, or stranded on a deserted island. Miners trapped a mile under the surface of the earth, a youth soccer team lost in a deep cave, or a plane crash high up in the Andes of South America that pushed members of a rugby team from Uruguay to their human limits.

There are entire genres of television shows that cast everyday people out in the wild to see how they make do and survive: we can watch them look for food, make a fire, collect water, and build their shelters.

Fifteen years ago, two NFL football players and their two friends set off for a typical day of fishing out in the Gulf of Mexico off of Clearwater, Florida. At first, the waters were calm, and the men were enjoying the day. But then a storm rolled in, and the waves and winds picked up and the 15-foot wave flipped the anchored fishing boat and the four were thrown into the sea. Nick Schuyler clung to the capsized boat for two days in open water waiting and hoping to be rescued. He later told the Coast Guard that a helicopter shined its light in their direction on the first night, but to no avail. The other men could not hand on through the long hours as the waves battered the boat through the storm. As the hours passed, the men got separated and three drifted away. Two days after Nick was rescued, the search was called off.

The ancient Israelites wandering in the wilderness for 40 years is a survival story. The archetype for Lent is Jesus' own survivor-type experiences that lasted 40 days.

The Bible is full of stories of storms and survival. Jonah tossed overboard. Jesus calming storms. The Apostle Paul also experienced his own dangerous winter voyage and storm at sea as a prisoner sent to Rome to plead his case before the emperor. In Acts 27 & 28 we hear of the harrowing tale of the ship that carried Paul and 275 others. We read how:

18 “We were being pounded by the storm so violently that on the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard, 19 and on the third day with their own hands they threw the ship’s tackle overboard. 20 When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest raged, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned.” The chapter reads like a scene from *The Perfect Storm* filmed in Gloucester.

Paul spoke with a reassuring voice and said what Jesus would tell his followers often “do not be afraid.” V. 24. The ship would later break after on a reef off of Malta and Paul barely escaped.

When people are fighting for their survival, hanging on for dear life, and looking for help and rescue, it is critical that those searching for them and hoping to help know what to do. If a person falls through a hole in the frozen ice, a rope is thrown. If someone is caught on the second floor of a burning house, a ladder is found, and a window broken. If someone is drowning, someone jumps in the water to save them, or a life preserver is tossed nearby.

How does God save the world, the whole creation and the lives and souls of those God loves?

For Christians, the rescue plan is the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

In the New Testament passage, we read today, the apostle Paul tells the church gathered in Corinth centuries ago about how God chose to rescue those who were perishing and struggling in the stormy waters of life. He wrote: “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” (I Corinthians 1:18)

One gets the sense right away that Paul realizes the central contradiction and disconnect of the image of the cross. Instead of tossing a life preserver overboard, with the cross God seems to be throwing an anchor of shame and violence instead. Paul understands how the cross might not appear to non-believers as a sign of hope and new life. Nevertheless, he continues to make his case. “But we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. (v. 23) The symbol of Roman occupation and cruelty was now becoming the most unlikely symbol for God’s power to overcome death.

As we move towards Holy Week and Easter, the cross can be an object of our reflection, devotion, and prayer. Crosses hang in our churches, some hospital rooms, they are painted on the sides of ambulances in war zones and disaster areas and are still worn around the necks of monks and nuns and everyday believers.

What do you see? Foolishness? Death or life? Tragedy or triumph?

The cross is a powerful message and image, a symbol, an event can be seen in different ways. How did Charles Dickens open his “*A Tale of Two Cities*: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the

epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.”

For the cross to lead to the empty tomb and the Resurrection, there are more than a few obstacles along the way.

And it can seem foolish to put our faith in historical events that took place so long ago.

It can be foolish to believe that a person's heart can be cracked open, and that life can be reborn and made new again.

With the never-ending cascading barrage of global pain and hurt reaching us on a continuing basis, it can seem hard to hang to love and hope as the way forward – but that is our call and the only way.

God often sends rowboats, motorboats, helicopters, and friends, strangers, angels, moments of awe and times of discomfort our way. Many can be overlooked or ignored. The lifeline we are search for can come in unexpected ways.

Paul's conviction and his faith challenge to us today to keep looking in unlikely places and overlooked people for wisdom and direction.

Weakness can be strength. An end can be a beginning. Dying leads to new life.