

Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
May 1, 2016

Psalm 148:1-13a; Romans 8:22-28
“A Whale of a Time”

Pack 43, once again welcome to this worship service at your sponsoring congregation, Redwoods Presbyterian Church.

You guys spend a lot of time in forests, hills and mountains. You enjoy camping and hiking in these places and learn to take care of them.

Today I am taking you to the sea. The poem on the cover of the bulletin is a wonderful expression of one person's absolute appreciation of the sea. He waxes eloquently about the wind, whales and his own wonder about being in the ocean just as you all would speak excitedly about being in the wilderness.

In the past few years, I have spoken to you about my experiences in mountains and rivers. Today, I hope to expand your appreciation of the ocean and its adventures.

I have called this sermon “A Whale of the Time.” Do you know what “a whale of a time” means? Of all the fish and mammals in the sea, which is the biggest? A whale, therefore, a whale of a time is a big time. To have a whale of a time is to have a big experience. What would be a big experience?

I think the Golden State Warriors, our special Bay Area basketball team, is having a big experience this season, breaking a bunch of NBA records and clinching the first round of the playoffs. They're having a whale of a time and so are we watching them.

The last time you went camping in the High Sierras, you probably had a whale of a time. A whale of a time can also be a massively enjoyable time.

I had a whale of a time on my honeymoon in Hawaii with Suellen 40 years ago. I surfed waves as big as whales at Waimea Bay and the Bonsai Pipeline. A wipeout at Pipeline almost ended my life and therefore my honeymoon. Still, it was a whale of a time.

It occurred to me after I printed the bulletin that the best and biggest sea story in scripture for me is not the story of Noah's ark and the flood and Jonah and the whale, although they are big stories. It is the story of Apostle Paul in the biblical Book of Acts, chapter 27, on a ship in the Mediterranean Sea. Paul embarks on a journey to Rome. A wild storm drives the ship for 14 days in rough seas away from their destination and eventually grounds them on the rocks off the island of Malta. The crew swims to shore.

The message in that story is that bad things happen to good people and when they do, we can call upon God, as Paul does, to see us through in the best possible way. When we pray to God, we can receive strength, courage and the will to get through the toughest times.

The New Testament scripture I included today is from a letter written by Paul. He speaks of a groaning earth, in other words an earth and its creatures in pain and his desire that God in Christ will relieve us from the pain. We believe as Christians that we can work with God to help relieve the pain and care for the earth.

Ways to do this is to reduce the number of fish we catch in the ocean so we do not run out and have no more to feed us and that we keep nature in balance. Healthy sea life depends on abundance and balance of fish and plants.

We used to catch fish with abandon, with no controls on the numbers caught. This is still the case in many places in the world and therefore we need human will and international treaties to stem the tide of untold many catches.

When I was young, I was unaware of the problem and yet had a whale of a time enjoying a whale-catching experience. I'll tell you the story and in the same breathe say that I am grateful that this story will never happen again. As a kid, I did not know the difference and I admit I had a whale of a time.

I was about 10 years old. My neighbor was an engineer on a coal-fired steam train and his job at the time was to transport whales from the entrance of the Durban, South Africa, harbor to a whaling station through the night. The whales came off ships and were carried on flat bed trailers a few miles around a bluff.

My neighbor invited me to join him one night. You can imagine how exciting this was for me. I watched the whales being hauled onto the train and I helped drive the train and shoveled coal into the fire that steamed the engine. Between loads, we fished in the bay. I was Huckleberry Finn for a night.

I watched the offloading of the whales at the whaling station and saw them immediately cut up by waiting workers with scythes (that is, sharp blades at the end of a stick). The smell was terrible.

Thank God, this operation has closed and there is a law that stops whale hunting and protects the diminishing whale species in most places of the world. I'm not sure who caused the laws that restrict unlimited whaling. I know however that protecting diminishing species and our beautiful earth is part of what God calls us to do as Christians.

Another story and this one illustrates the tremendous courage and caring one experiences in the ocean 24/7. Mine happened again during the night. In my early adult days, I was a newspaper journalist in the city of Durban.

My beat for one year was shipping reporter. I went on every conceivable ship in the year, cargo ships, tankers, bulk carriers, submarines, aircraft carriers, frigates, animal ships, refrigerator ships and passenger liners interviewing captains, engineers, interesting sea men and women, and stowaways. This was before container ships dominated shipping.

A ship's agent told me that he was going out to sea on a tugboat to rendezvous with the world's biggest tanker (it was too big to enter our harbor) to receive a sick seaman and take him to a hospital on shore. He knew this would make a good story and invited me to go with him. I was in for a whale of a time.

We took off from the harbor and soon entered the ocean, which had 20-foot wave swells. Rising up and down, we sped along until we came to the ship, which had its engines on but brought to a snail's pace to discharge the sick seaman.

We went alongside the ship and it was like looking up a seven-story dark, black-faced building. Our only vision was the light of the tugboat. The ship's agent had to board the ship to sign papers with the captain and he invited me along. To do so was one of most dangerous experiences in my life.

A ladder was lowered down the side of the ship and stopped next to the boat but the boat was rising 20 feet up and 20 feet down and when the deck was in line with the ladder one had to jump on to it and grab it at the same time. I did so and immediately the boat dropped 20 feet below me and the signal was given to haul me up. We did the business onboard and individually got onto the ladder and lowered down. When it reached the boat the crew hooked the ladder with a rope and pulled it towards the deck, and they shouted "jump" and I did so onto the deck with hands securing me.

Then the seaman was lowered, strapped to a stretcher, and landed safely in dramatic fashion on to the tugboat. I took a picture of the seaman landing on the boat and I remember to this day his wide, frightening eyes.

We headed back to shore grateful for our safety and successful mission. Although scary as anything, I had a whale of a time. The story and picture was center, front page of the next day's newspaper.

When I was a pastor of another Bay Area church one of the members was a retired pilot captain and his job was to pilot ships from the harbor out to sea and he told me that he landed in the ocean once or twice and was rescued. Others have not been as

fortunate. You can imagine the prayers of this man. We are grateful for his courage and commitment to feed his family and to keep the wheels of industry turning.

I shall end there and ask God's blessing for you all and hope that you enjoy your next whale of a time experience and more and to thank God for the many courageous people out there and to do our part to take care of God's beautiful earth. Amen.