

Sunday, January 11, 2026

Sermon: "Lost at Sea"

Psalms 29 NRSV

Where we are going in today's message: Do you pray when life is smooth sailing, or wait until a storm hits?

If you want to feel small and powerless, take a fishing boat into the ocean, miles away from land. There is nothing but sky and water as far as the eye can see. As Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote, "Water, water everywhere, and not a drop to drink."

The ocean appears enormous, deep and mysterious from your tiny boat. You can grasp that we live on a watery planet with three-fourths of the Earth's surface covered by water. When a storm rolls in, you face powerful winds, massive waves and driving rain.

Back in the early 1960s, Adm. Hyman Rickover gave President John F. Kennedy a small brass plaque, engraved with a prayer. Kennedy liked it, and he used it at the dedication of a memorial to people missing at sea. The prayer says, "O God, thy sea is so great and my boat is so small." True for us all.

A young man named Alec Frydman recently went fishing for albacore off the coast of Washington State. This was his first attempt to be a commercial fisherman after taking a Coast Guard course at a community college. He headed out with a captain named Mick on a 43-foot wooden boat constructed in 1941.

Their fishing went well on the first day, but a storm blew up on the second. They put the boat on autopilot and headed back toward land. When waves began to crash over the sides of the boat, Alec reached for the radio and sent out a Mayday. Alec urged Mick to come outside, but the captain remained frozen in his seat. Then Alec fell overboard, into the ocean.

He was living the words of Psalm 69: "I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me" (v. 2).

Bobbing to the surface, Alec saw the inflatable life raft in its canister, floating nearby. He yanked the rip cord, inflated it and climbed in. The wooden fishing boat rolled onto its side and then sank quickly. Alec never saw Captain Mick again.

"The life raft was small but sheltered," recalls Alec in The Atlantic magazine, "like a kiddie pool but sturdier, and with a camping tent on top. The sides shuddered in the wind and rain, but I felt relatively safe inside. Certain that rescue was coming ... I fell asleep."

When he awoke, the storm was still raging. He heard the waters "roar and foam," like the author of Psalm 46 (v. 3). He took inventory of his supplies and shot off two flares. But there was no one to rescue him, so he floated for days under dark, stormy skies. The sea was so great and his boat was so small.

"I prayed often," he says, "always aloud. At first, pleas for rescue. Over and over, I asked God to save me - not my soul, but my physical self. After days of praying the same prayer, I tried offering God something in return. First, I apologized for every past transgression I could remember. Any injustice or sin I feared I may have committed, I tried to atone for, so God would listen to my prayers."

Alec recalled the Ten Commandments and realized that he had failed to keep them. "I hadn't honored the Sabbath in years," he admits; "I had lied; I had coveted; I had stolen. Worst of all, I hadn't honored my mother and father." He asked God to forgive him for the way that he had treated his parents, ignoring their guidance and insisting that he could figure out everything on his own.

Alec came to the depressing conclusion that he was going to lose his life, and his parents were going to lose their son.

What would you do if you were lost at sea? Pray, apologize, atone, confess? The truth is, we can pray to God at any time and in any place. We don't have to be trapped on life rafts to do inventories of our lives and take steps to get ourselves right with God and with each other. But we often wait until we are in a vulnerable spot before we reach out to the Lord.

We use the phrase "at sea" to describe a variety of situations. The literal meaning is that we are like Alec, riding in a ship or a boat, physically floating on the water. But the figurative meaning of "at sea" is that we are confused or perplexed. We are feeling lost, disoriented or bewildered. Perhaps we are facing a complex situation or having difficulty understanding something.

A college student might say, "Organic chemistry made no sense to me. All semester, I was at sea."

A young professional might say, "I was at sea trying to figure out the new software update."

Or, on a more emotional level, a husband might say, "When my wife asked for a divorce, I felt disoriented and lost. For months, I was at sea."

At one time or another, we've all been lost at sea. Not like Alec in the Pacific, but in our schools, our jobs and our relationships. But the good news is this: God is with us in the deep waters, listening to us and looking for us.

After five or six days of drifting, Alec saw a ship and launched a flare, but the ship kept going. By the end of the first week, he ran out of fresh water, and he accepted the fact that he was going to die. But instead of falling into despair, something amazing happened. Alec says, "A peace I hadn't known to look for found me."

He hadn't been looking for peace, but peace found him. What a powerful truth this is: When we are lost at sea, overwhelmed by the chaos of life, God finds us and gives us peace.

The words of the Bible affirm this. "The voice of the LORD is over the waters," says the writer of Psalm 29; "the God of glory thunders, the LORD, over mighty waters" (v. 3). Our God has power over the watery chaos of life and can offer us the gifts of his peace and powerful presence when we feel we have no options available to us. In our most desperate situations - at school, at work and at home - God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God.

The next morning, Alec woke up and saw a boat. It was close and coming closer. He lit his last flare and held onto it until it burnt his hand. He screamed and waved his hands, looking and sounding like a madman.

Then he heard a person say, "We see you. We're coming. We see you."

Alec was rescued after being lost at sea for 13 days. He had drifted about 150 miles.

The promise of Scripture is that God has power over the watery chaos of life. When we are confused or perplexed, God is searching

for us. When we are feeling lost, disoriented or bewildered, God is listening to our prayers. When we are facing complex situations, God is offering us his peace. In the words of Bible scholar Artur Weiser, God “appears in the tumult of the elements and manifests his awesome glory.” God’s glory is a visible sign of his power, holiness and love. In the greatest tumult of life, we can see God’s glory.

God’s glory was seen in the baptism of Jesus, which is celebrated in many churches today. The beginning of the ministry of Jesus was marked by a passing through waters, when John baptized him in the Jordan River. For a moment, Jesus was at sea. But then, as he came up from the water, the heavens opened and God’s Spirit came down like a dove and perched on him. And a voice from the heavens said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17).

As Jesus emerges from the water, we see God’s glory. In Jesus, we glimpse the clearest possible sign of God’s power, holiness and love. Jesus is nothing less than living proof that God is with us. Jesus is like the person on the boat who called out to Alec and said, “We see you. We’re coming. We see you.”

This work of seeing and reaching out and rescuing continues today, especially among the followers of Jesus. The Christian community is nothing less than the body of Christ, the physical presence of Jesus in the world today. Jesus has no eyes but our eyes, no hands but our hands, no feet but our feet. Our challenge and opportunity is to show his power and love to people who are overwhelmed.

When a person is feeling lost at sea, we can say, “We see you.”

When people are facing danger, we can say, “We’re coming.”

When individuals or families are dealing with complex situations, we can say, “Let’s work on this together.”

When people are confused, disoriented or bewildered, we can say, “Let us help you find safety.”

In the church today, we can provide this kind of help because we serve a Lord of power, holiness and love. “The Lord sits enthroned over the flood,” says Psalm 29 (v. 10). This means that our Lord has power over anything that can hurt us in body, mind or spirit. Our Lord

gives “strength to his people,” promises the psalm. Our Lord can “bless his people with peace” (29:11).

Back home with his family for Thanksgiving, Alec Frydman said, “I wanted to tell everyone how blessed I felt, but whatever words I considered felt far too small. I suspect they felt the same.”

Alec was right. There are no words to describe the experience of being lost at sea and then rescued. But we can all put our trust in the God who rules over the waters, and who gives his people the life-saving gifts of strength, peace and love. Alleluia, Amen.