

Sermon by Rev. Allison J. Beaulieu  
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church  
April 30, 2006

## **Crossing Over**

For those of you who thought this sermon was going to be about Jonathan Edwards and the recent phenomenon of “crossing over”, I am sorry to disappoint you. This sermon is not about how to communicate with people long since passed. In fact, this sermon has nothing to do with the past, but has everything to do with the present and how we are living our lives at this very moment.

These days, I find myself sinking in the torrents of a fast-paced culture. I am wondering if you feel the same? Everything about our culture is fast. First of all, there is the phenomenon of fast food. We want to eat food and we want it fast, because we’re hungry. Not only do we want our food fast but we eat it fast. I can think of many times when I stopped at the local Taco Bell drive-thru only to inhale my taco before my meeting in five minutes. (Talk about indigestion.) Secondly, we receive information fast. But, we want it that way and we expect it. These days, we have e-mail, cellular telephones, and fax machines. These three modes of communication have the potential to keep me busy more than 50% of the day. I am sure that those of you who work in a business environment can relate to this—the constant attention to rings, beeps, and whistles. But, even if you don’t work in a business setting, but work elsewhere you know what I am talking about. The pressure is on to do your work quickly and efficiently so that you can pack as much as you can into one day. If you’re a stay at home mom, you’re probably the queen of multi-tasking. In my eyes, no one does it better. Not only do you keep up with all the household management, but you also take care of the kids, driving them to lessons, practices, and performances. Your life is fast—there’s no doubt about it. To re-cap, we eat fast, we work fast, and oh...we drive fast! OK—no offense to all you native Pittsburghers but Pittsburgh has to be the capital of road rage. There’s been many times when I received a not-so-nice hand gesture by people who simply think they are just better drivers than me. It begins to rub off on you after awhile (not the not-so-nice hand gestures but the driving fast). So, it seems to me that so many of us are caught

up in the speed of life. My question today is “How does the speed of our culture impact our spirituality?” Well let’s get right to it, then.

When we enter Mark’s gospel today, Jesus has just finished a series of parables. It seems that his teaching has been an all-day affair. We are told in 4:1 that such a large crowd gathered beside the sea, that Jesus had to literally get into a boat and teach from there. For anyone that has given a public address or a sermon, you know how exhausting it is to be in the spotlight. So, Jesus was surely drained from the day’s activities.

Knowing that the east side of the Sea of Galilee was less populated and would provide an adequate resting spot, Jesus says to his disciples, “Let us go across to the other side.”

This is a good place to note that Jesus’ world was also fast-paced and busy. He didn’t have never-ending e-mails flying into his inbox, but he was faced with many people who needed his help and searched him out for his healing and advice. Just as Jesus knew the importance of doing God’s work, he also knew the importance of getting away—of retreating to an oasis of peace and tranquility where he could talk to God and silently reflect on his purpose. This is precisely why he urges his disciples to go to the other side. Jesus needed some time alone.

And so, the disciples take Jesus with them in the boat. Now they’re going along just fine until they see the ominous sky overhead. Perhaps someone said, “Do you think we should wake Jesus.” Another might have answered, “No, he is exhausted and needs his rest. We’ll be fine.” But, then the rain started to pour and the wind began to howl. A storm planted itself right above their boat. I’ve read that the storm may have been like a tornado-style whirlwind descending from above. I have no doubt that it was a scary scene. Before long, as water began creeping into the boat, the disciples knew they were in trouble. The disciples figured it was now time to wake Jesus. So, as it were, Jesus was awoken by “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” Jesus calmly stood up, looked out to the raging sea and said, “Peace, Be still!”

You’ve probably heard many very good sermons on this passage about the storms in your life. Thus, the storm in this scripture is a metaphor for the unforeseen challenges and hardships we encounter each and every day. And, Jesus’ command is a wake-up call to us to rely on God’s ultimate providence and sovereignty. This is a wonderful interpretation, but allow me, if you will, to offer a different approach. When I read this

passage, I saw something a little different. What stuck out in my mind was not so much the storm but the crossing over from one side to another. The way I see it, the crossing over can be a metaphor for how we in this fast-paced culture get from complete busyness to total communion with God. When I say “communion with God,” I mean that we are centered in prayer, meditation, reading of the scriptures, or worship. I mean that our whole body, mind, and soul are focused on God and nowhere else. So, how do we get from point A to point B—from busyness to uninterrupted contemplation? The process is never easy.

It certainly wasn't easy for the disciples. While they were leaving the busyness of the day behind and sailing toward reprieve, they ran into a storm of epic proportions. The storm scared the living daylights out of them (with good reason!). Their crossing over was filled with fear and distraction. How many of your “crossings” are also filled with distraction? For me, in all honesty, my spiritual life is often damaged by distraction. Every time I find myself boarding the ship and preparing to cross over to rest in God's blessed peace, I am distracted by the world around me—by images, by the television, by the computer and the internet, by the telephone, by my to-do list that sits on my desk. Everything that we have created to make our lives easier has caused the most important thing—our spiritual lives—to suffer. Like the disciples, we are distracted by the power of chaos.

In seminary, I had a bible study group which got together about once a week to pray, read the scriptures, and to be in fellowship with one another. Well, it was during finals of our first year and we found that we were completely too distracted for fruitful bible study. Some of us were struggling through our classes. Some of us had family issues and/or boyfriend issues. Some of us were questioning our calling to the ministry. And some of us were really just questioning if we were cut out for seminary. We were all wounded, in a way—struggling to keep up with the world around us and failing miserably at it. One night, we got together and knew we had to do something about this—we needed to let our distractions go and re-connect with the God that called us all to that seminary for a purpose. So, we went outside and we wrote all our anxieties on little pieces of paper. We went around the circle and threw them in a pot, one by one. After we had released all our pieces of paper, we struck a match and we set them on fire.

We just sat there and watched them burn; we watched the thick black smoke ascend up into the heavens along with all our anxieties and distractions. In that moment, we all felt God's presence because we surrendered all those distractions and sat there together, still wounded, but in peace. It was powerful and symbolic. It was liberating. It was the crossing over.

In my personal opinion, Jesus was not only talking to the wind and rain, but he was also talking to the disciples when he said, "Peace! Be still!" This same idea is reinforced in our psalm today—Psalm 46. In it, we hear, "Be still and know that I am God." In essence, Jesus is telling us how to go about the process of crossing over. He is telling us to stop and reside in the stillness and to rest in the promise that our lives are taken care of by the one triune God who seeks us and knows us. He is telling us not to feat when we leave our to-do list behind and focus on the God that gives us breath, and life, and love.

Perhaps you are thinking that in this day and age, being still is hardly possible—that having real, genuine communion with God is a pipe dream. I can assure you it is not. When I worked as a chaplain at UPMC Presbyterian Hospital, I knew a physician who would come to the chapel during the day. Sometimes when I was refilling the devotionals or cleaning up, I'd see her in there facing this gigantic painting. It was a simple painting of a multi-colored sky and some green rolling hills. On the bottom left of the painting was written "Be still and know that I am God." I never saw her close her eyes. She would just stare at that scripture, like she was internalizing it, like every moment she was receiving more and more peace about her. It never failed though; her pager would always go off while she was there. She would mute it, stare but a few moments more, take a long breath, and then leave.

Because I worked at the hospital and know what it is like to watch people die and feel helpless, I can tell you what she was thinking. I can tell you that she always found comfort in that scripture because so many people saw their lives in her hands and, in turn, she always put them in God's. She knew that whatever she did to try and heal, she was only human. God is the Great Physician and ultimately it is God that decides who lives and who dies. She knew that crossing over required being still and even in the midst of her busy life, she found a way to be still and let God be God.

One of my worst fears is reaching a ripe-old age and regretting the fact that for most of my life I was distracted by meaningless things. What if I am so distracted that I miss God's call to me. I am sure that may be a fear of yours too. That's why we need to make sure that the way be clear for the spirit to help us cross over into God's grace. It is in this contemplative state where we can re-connect with God and re-connect with ourselves and who God wants us to be. It is in this state where the resurrected one, who entered into our chaos and distraction, will whisper in your ear, "Peace. Be still!"

Crossing over into God's peace is challenging but not impossible. We all need to find a way across that Sea of Distraction. Not all of our crossing over will look alike—it may be a burning pot of anxiety or a sacred space of inspiration. Whatever way works for you, we need to get there—to that other side away from the busyness of life and in communion with the one who created us and sustains us. Have faith, brothers and sisters in Christ. God will get us safely to the other side and the journey will be well worth it.