

# WHAT DECK CHAIRS?

**A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs  
Preached on Sunday, January 25, 2015**

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

## **An Ancient Fear: Water Equals Chaos**

One of the oddities about the ancient Hebrew culture was that they were non-seafarers in the millennia or so before the time of Christ. They got over this as time passed, but here they were, located right on the Mediterranean Sea, and they actually had a problem with water generally. In Genesis I, there's a notion that water equals chaos. In the time of Noah, water means judgment; water equals the death of darn near everything. In the time of Jonah, water brings death and punishment.

For the Phoenicians, who lived directly to the North of the Israelites, water wasn't a problem at all. Farther around the corner of the Mediterranean to the Northwest, the Greeks and Macedonians were avid seafarers. Then down to the northern coast of Africa, Egypt and the territories to the Near East and the West, all were seafarers.

## **A Symbol of Safety Quells Leviathan**

To generalize, nearly everybody bordering on the Mediterranean conducted business, travel, and diplomacy by sea, except for the Israelites, who dreaded the sea at that time in their history. After all, Leviathan was the sea monster who lived out there, and it spurred the Israelites to produce a symbol for the church that has lasted the entire existence of the church to the present day. That symbol is ships. A ship is a place of safety above the chaos, a place of security to ride out the storm. It is a home floating above, and therefore out of the reach of, otherwise certain death, just like the ark of Noah.

The ship has become one of the preeminent symbols of the church. A ship upon the sea has come to represent the church in the world. As a symbol for the World Council of Churches, its logo features a ship prominently. Same thing for the National Council of Churches.

## **What Kind of Ship Is Best?**

If you Google stained-glass windows of a ship, you will come up with hundreds, many of them beautiful. The nave of the church, where you guys are sitting, between the vestibule and the chancel, is where we get the word "naval," which is the body of the ship. In Moby Dick, the pulpit in the Nantucket Church was fashioned as the prow of a ship, and the minister always began the sermon with the salutation, "Dear shipmates."

All of this begs the question, What kind of ship is the best symbol for the church? There are several possible answers. For a number of churches, I get the very strong feeling that it's a cruise ship, gleaming, polished, beautiful, with third-world types offering you a mai tai or a piña colada. For other kinds of churches, I think it's really closer to an ark, overcrowded and smelly, but desperately beautiful considering the alternative.

More answers: a passenger ship, a cargo ship, a tanker, a slow boat to China, the QE II, a ship of fools, an icebreaker clearing the way through the Northwest Passage, a whaler bristling with harpoons. Or a shrimp boat, part of Forrest Gump's fleet of jennies, with flipping shrimp and wet nets. Some churches imagine themselves as destroyers with 15-inch guns, accurate for miles, others are the H.M.S. Beagle, loaded down with specimens. And I know there are a number of people who sort of wish the church was the S.S. Minnow. If not for the courage of the fearless crew, it would be lost.

### **The Mainline Is Sidelined**

For the last roughly 50 years or more, the portion of the church called "mainline" – which has now become "sideline" – has really only one answer to the choice of a ship, and that is the Titanic. From the 1950's up to around 2010, mainline church membership declined from well over 50 percent of the population – think about this – to 15 percent. Over 60 years, the protestant population of the United States went from more than 50 percent to 15 percent. Have we seen a change like that?

The average age of the mainline pastor has gone from the 40's to the 50's (I'm 59). The Southern Baptist Convention posted its first-ever decline in membership about five years ago. Think about that too. These folks are hard-core evangelicals; there is nothing more important to them than scrounging for new members. Yet they posted a decline, and they continue to do so.

The gist of these disconcerting numbers is that the iceberg has been hit. The ship is taking on water; it's beginning to list; it's just a matter of time. The story of the Titanic is a great one, a fascinating, compelling story. We know how it ends, but it wasn't always so. From the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and for much of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the church was a different kind of ship.

### **The Church's Chase after Victory Brings Defeat**

My pet theory about it is that the kind of ship it was in that period is what caused it to be the Titanic later on. I think the ship it was then was an aircraft carrier with thousands on board, a floating city destined for pride and glory. Unassailable, it represented the church militant, the church victorious.

Victory was highly important to the church. For one thing, read the words of a bunch of hymns from the era of the late 1800's and the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. You can almost hear the sounds of battle and the cries of victory. For another, look carefully at religious icons. On virtually all of

them, you will see the letters IC XC NIKA. The first four, IC XC, are the initials for Jesus Christ in old capital Greek, and NIKA is the Greek word for “victor.” Victory over death, of course, but it became expanded far beyond that. Victory over whatever needed to be defeated.

### **The Mission Became Colonialism Light**

And this ship, the aircraft carrier, sent out sorties – we called them “missions” – and here I’m probably being a touch offensive (in both my tactics and my indelicacy) because many of those missions did wonderful things. But every so often, these missions had an ulterior motive that often became the primary goal, to further the will and the way of the American church. Steeped in the American way, the American culture, it was colonialism light. During that era, from the late 1800’s to about 1969-1970, the church had a kind of triumphalist attitude – loath to accommodate, not interested in anything wimpy like interfaith dialogue.

So what kind of ship is it now? It went from being an aircraft carrier, and then it started taking on water and became the Titanic. I’m offering this metaphor of ships to help us get a feeling for what our identity is at this point. What are we about? What are we for? I’ve got some ideas that I’d like to offer. A lot of time has passed since that change, the devastating decline in church membership, took place. Can you believe that Kennedy was assassinated 52 years ago? That we pulled out of Vietnam 40 years ago? That September 11 was 14 years ago? Do you realize that there are a lot of kids in school who don’t remember 9/11?

### **Potential Ships for God’s Passengers**

I’d like to offer three potential answers to the question of what kind of ship best describes our present situation:

**1. Alvin.** The first I would propose is a very small but magnificent vessel called Alvin. It’s tiny. It doesn’t evoke awe when you look at it, but it was magnificent at the task of plumbing the depths, of going where we hadn’t gone before. And as a metaphor, the Church universal has been extraordinarily successful at maintaining its tradition, maintaining its institutional memory, but it’s been lousy at being a pioneer. And I offer little Alvin to you as a symbol of what it means to go deep, to go bravely where no one has gone before, to peer into the dark, to go to those places where the map says, “There be dragons.” And I might add, as a historical footnote, guess who found the Titanic? Yes, Alvin.

**2. Calypso.** A second one for your consideration is Calypso, a ship made famous by Jacques Cousteau, who brought knowledge of the relatively unknown ocean to an entire generation. Not a bad metaphor for a church. It was used hard, was nearly worn out, and spread knowledge as well as goodwill throughout the world. But in other ways, Calypso is a little compromised as a metaphor in that it was originally a British minesweeper. Later it was bought by one of the Guinness

beer people and then leased for one franc per year to Cousteau, who used it for many years until finally it sank ignobly in a Singapore harbor. It was later raised and allowed to sit and rust for another decade until it was bought by Carnival Cruise Lines with the intention of refurbishing it.

### **The Third Answer Is Best**

**3. a. Mayflower.** Much as I love Alvin and Calypso, the third answer is in my opinion not only the best but it is also well-steeped in irony. That is the Mayflower. I would remind you that Pilgrim is primarily a spiritual term. You and I are on a pilgrimage. They, the original Pilgrims, and we seek and covet freedom of belief, and we abhor the suffocating strictures of human institutions.

**3. b.** Lest you think I am speaking only of Congregationalists, let me quote from the Presbyterian Book of Order: “God alone is Lord of the conscience and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to His word or beside it in matters of faith and worship.” Take note that the words I would emphasize are “hath left it free.”

### **Inner and Outer Spiritual Answers**

**3. c.** Best of all, there’s an inner spiritual reason for choosing this ship over the other two. The outer spiritual reason is that of the Pilgrimage, of the ship carrying Pilgrims to a promised land. The inner spiritual reason is the name Mayflower, a spring flower, a subtle hint of resurrection and growth and rebirth. Of light shining in the darkness, of warmth overcoming the chill of winter.

The church with the spirit of God will not sink. The Titanic metaphor will pass, but the church will not sink. It may be storm-tossed, but it will not be beached on some shore to rot in the surf and the sun.

Instead, the church of God would be *very* interested in plumbing the depths of divinity and spirituality, and in exploring the worlds of faith and reason and science. And this ship would be *very* interested in conveying her passengers above the chaos of a much-feared ocean toward a promised land, a land of integrity and freedom and goodwill.

### **No Room for Deck Chairs**

In conclusion, I acknowledge that I don’t know which ship the church will morph into in the coming century. I hope it’s one of these three, but regardless of how they are arranged, there isn’t room for any deck chairs on any of these three ships. Not at all. The reason is very simple; it’s that the passengers have better things to do.

*Amen.*