

5th Sunday after Pentecost
Texts: Ezekiel 2:1-5; Mark 6:1-13
Preacher: The Rev. R. Bruce Todd

St. Peter's - Lafayette Hill, PA.
July 5, 2009

“If a Tree Falls in the Woods . . .”

“Titanic.” Say the word, and everyone, everywhere knows the story. Whether you know the name because you saw the movie, or you know the name because you spent the bulk of your life in the twentieth century, you still know the name.

“Titanic” means huge, gargantuan, immense. The word “Titanic,” which rhymes with “gigantic,” brings visions of unstoppable power, immovable force, impenetrable resistance. The “Titanic” really set the tone for the next hundred years. In that single ship was the most advanced engineering, the heights of luxury and lavish design, and the cutting edge of ingenuity. There was nothing greater, or grander, than the “Titanic.” And she sank on her maiden voyage. The epitome of progress was destroyed by a big chunk of hard, blue water: an iceberg.

Today, our twenty-first century “Titanics” have different names, and more subtle sinkings. Some of the 21st century “Titanics are:” General Motors; Ponzie Schemes; FreddieMac; Fannie Mae; Chrysler. So many of us put so much of ourselves and so much of our livelihoods “aboard” these “Titanics.” Why? We were convinced that they were far “too big to fail.” But eventually the icebergs came. Nothing . . . No one . . . No business . . . No nation . . . No ideology . . . Nothing is . . . “too big to fail.” No matter how large, no matter how powerful, companies that are poorly run, inexpertly handled, extravagantly over-spent: will fail.

That is why Jesus’ ministry and message were not about up and down, success or failure, winning or losing. As someone both fully human and fully divine, Jesus got to taste the raw flavor of failure at the very beginning of his public ministry. We read in today’s Gospel from Mark of Jesus returning to his hometown of Nazareth. Jesus got hit in the face with the failure of familiarity. How could Jesus have anything profound or inspired to offer the people of Nazareth when they had seen him running down the streets in a droopy diaper? How could the “son of Mary,” someone of apparently questionable parentage and no social standing, be a possible messiah? How could a mere wood carver, a day laborer, claim any authority to speak God’s word with divine insight?

And yet he did. Jesus returned to Nazareth. Jesus made a point of going home and facing the ultimate test – the home crowd. He knew the expected consequences. He knew the rumors of rejection, that “familiarity breeds contempt.” But mostly he knew Nazareth needed the word of God, and he needed to offer the face of God to them first. He longed to give back to them the words of repentance, the spirit of forgiveness, the face of truth, the function of blessing. But Nazareth could not hear those words. Nazareth was deafened by the din of familiarity. Jesus

was a known entity. A common kid. How could he have a new message to offer them? One of the hardest things in the world is to “know” the familiar.

Think of our the high school reunions. Imagine being in the high school class of Bill Gates. We can't do college, because Gates was a Harvard drop-out. But if you had been in Bill Gates' 10 year high school reunion, you would have talked to a hugely geeky guy, a wannabe working on some weirdo-ideas about some technological wizardry. The ten Year Anniversary grade for Bill Gates? Loser. But what about the 20th Anniversary of the Bill Gates high school reunion? Quite a different story. How about the richest man in the world? Worth billions. No longer a geek, but “The Microsoft Magnate.” Who'd a thunk it!

Don't listen to those who tell you, some people and companies are “too big to fail.” No one is beyond failure. No one is too big or too small to fail. Everyone, indeed, DOES fail. Losing at one chance in life is no sign that you will always be a loser. Jesus went home to Nazareth—and lost. Jesus went to Jerusalem—and lost. Jesus went to the crowds—and lost. In a majority vote of epic proportions, the crowds called for Barabas, and Jesus lost. Jesus shows us that in order to accomplish what God wants done - we may be viewed as failures among the people of this world.

Today we are celebrating Independence Day Weekend. The United States of America is 233 years old today. That's a long time for a nation to remain free. But, when you look at our history in the context of world history - America is just a child among the nations of the world. England, France, Germany, Egypt, China, Japan, Rome, Greece - all make America's history seem so short. Think of what a brief time we've really been here as a nation: When Thomas Jefferson died, Abraham Lincoln was a young man of 17. When Lincoln was assassinated, Woodrow Wilson was a boy of 8. By the time Wilson died Ronald Reagan was a boy of 12. And most of us remember when Ronald Reagan died. There you have it. The lives of four men can take you all the way back to the beginning of our country, 233 years ago.

We are so young. And yet we stand tall among these nations because of the principles on which we were established: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed - *by their Creator* - with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.

We consider ourselves a Great Country, but the early colonists knew we were not too big to fail. Fifty-six men signed the Declaration of Independence. At the time most of them ended up being viewed as failures. Their conviction resulted in sufferings for themselves and their families. Of those 56 men, five were captured by the British and tortured before they died. Twelve had their homes ransacked and burned. Two lost their sons in the Revolutionary Army. Another had two sons captured. Nine of the fifty-six fought and died from wounds or hardships of the war. Carter Braxton of Virginia a wealthy planter and trader, saw his ships sunk by the British navy. He sold his home and properties to pay his debts and died in poverty. At the

battle of Yorktown, the British General Cornwallis had taken over Thomas Nelson's home for his headquarters. Nelson quietly ordered General George Washington to open fire on the Nelson home. The home was destroyed and Nelson died bankrupt. John Hart was driven from his wife's bedside as she was dying. Their thirteen children fled for their lives. His fields and mill were destroyed. For over a year, he lived in forest and caves, returning home only to find his wife dead and his children vanished. A few weeks later, he himself died from exhaustion.

Were these men failures? Their peers may have thought so. But those of us here 233 years later know that they were not failures. We are the ones benefitting from their sacrifices. A person does not always live to see the results of their actions. This is part of the message from the prophet Ezekiel in our Old Testament Lesson for today.

Ezekiel speaks and says: He said to me: O mortal, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you. And when he spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet; and I heard him speaking to me. He said to me, Mortal, I am sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have transgressed against me to this very day. The descendants are impudent and stubborn. I am sending you to them, and you shall say to them, "Thus says the Lord God." Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.

Where are we as Americans? Are we the ones being sent to speak the Word of God to the rest of the world? Or, are we the Rebellious house? We argue whether or not the words "In God We Trust" should be included on our money. We debate if we should include the words, "One Nation, under God" in our pledge. Some say we should chisel away the words of The 10 Commandments that have been engraved in granite into many of our Courthouses.

We have become a Great Country. But remember the Titanic! Nothing can be so Great that it cannot still fail. We keep saying there should be separation of Church and State and yet our country was Founded on Religious principles. In George Washington's Farewell Address before leaving the office of the Presidency, he said: Do not let anyone claim tribute of American patriotism if they even attempt to remove religion from politics."

There is that old saying, "If a tree falls in the woods and no one is there to hear it . . . does it make any sound?" We may never know. But to the person who walks in the woods later - they see the effects of that fallen tree. So we are called to take action even if we will never see the results. That is what the prophet Ezekiel did when he spoke the words of God. He probably never knew if they took hold or not. Jesus was not concerned with looking like a success among the people as long as he was being faithful to his Heavenly Father. And the signers of the Declaration of Independence did not stick their necks out for themselves. They put their names to a document, not to gain themselves fame and fortune, but to provide Freedom and Independence for those who would follow them.

"Patriotism is not so much protecting the land of our fathers as it is preserving the land of our children." Our Country is at a place in history where it has never been before. We are at war with terrorism which has no geographical boundaries. We have a President that does not fit the demographics of any before him. Crime is up while the economy is down. The National Debt is high, while employment rates are low. If the Titanic could sink, can it be possible that the United States can fail?

In June of 1863, just weeks before the battle of Gettysburg, a college president asked Abraham Lincoln if he thought the country would survive. President Lincoln replied: "I do not doubt that our country will finally come through safe and undivided. But do not misunderstand me? I do not rely on the patriotism of our people, the bravery and devotion of the boys in blue or the loyalty and skill of our generals? But the God of our Fathers, who raised up this country to be the refuge and asylum of the oppressed and the downtrodden of all nations will not let it perish now. I may not live to see it? I do not expect to see it, but God will bring us through safe."

Let us continue to pray that God will. We may not hear that tree that falls in the woods when we are not there. But that doesn't mean it didn't happen. Likewise, we may not see the effects of the message of Jesus Christ after we tell it and leave, but that doesn't mean it is not heard and is working. In this great Country we have a man as president, but we still have God as our King. Amen