

# Congregational Church of the Messiah

Season of Lent 2009

## Lessons from the Sea: “Mystery”

Dr. David L. Gray

“I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky,  
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by...” John Masefield, “Sea Fever”

Ever-changing, yet eternally present, the sea holds within its verdant waves teeming life, massive power, opportunities unlimited for the brave souls who dare to venture out upon its rolling carpet to plumb the riches of its depths.

Standing on the shore of time, looking at the ancient yet ever-new creation, from a God mightier than any force we can imagine, how infinitesimal we are when compared to God’s great mysterious sea!

No matter how much we study the sea, somehow it seems impossible to capture the ethos that it evokes in the human mind and soul. You can get a graduate degree in oceanography and study one of thousands of aspects of the sea. From the sea’s composition to its many uses, its nature remains a mystery. Commercial shipping uses this phenomenal body of water for transporting goods from one continent to another. Travel agents and cruise lines make their living from the surface of the sea. Other people harvest its nearly endless supply of fish to provide high protein, low calorie, healthy eating all over the world.

For thousands of years, civilizations around the world have been intrigued with what they could do with the sea. At one point, there was a surge to develop underwater farming with the hope of providing an additional supply of food. In another period, there were experiments of living in large diving bells below the surface of the sea. Scientists discovered a way to take out the 3% salt content to provide fresh water for people and crops. Desalinization plants were seen as a major step in harnessing the resource of the sea for mankind’s use. We have learned and discovered much about the sea, but we still know but a small fraction of the mysteries hidden in the sea.

From the beginning of human life, people have been mysteriously drawn to the sea. It has been used to sustain life, to supply wealth and to provide adventure to lands unknown. On its waves wars have been fought and lives have been lost. Artists and poets have succumbed to its intriguing grandeur, its majestic capacity to soothe the human soul, as well as to excite within us eagerness to venture upon its endless carpet and follow its unknown reaches.

How the sea with its many facets was created can be studied and discussed ad infinitum. Why God chose to create as He did is a matter to be explained by faith more than by science, though there is no need for them to be in conflict. All we need to do is simply

acknowledge that

- a) We have not all the information.
- b) There is no debate over the obvious fact that the sea exists today and has existed from the beginning of the earth, as we know it.

Hidden in the mystery of creation itself is God's reason for creating as He did. Our biblical accounts are the best we have of how God separated the waters that covered the earth and uncovered land, knowing full well that the waters as well as the land would yield food so human life would be able to live with abundance upon the earth.

Intellectually and emotionally we are lead to admit that, when compared to the sea, we are not so large, grand, strong and everlasting. Compared with the grandeur of this creation from a God with unlimited power, wisdom and love for us. we learn the lesson of humility.

A former fifth grade teacher in Santa Monica tells how her students liked to have their end-of-the-year party at the beach. They would pack their lunches and beach towels and walk from Madison School. When they reached the sand, the students were given boundaries: "Stay between life guard towers #21 and #22 and only go into the ocean up to your knees." In 1982 a powerful winter storm hit the coastline. Her students came to school all excited and fearful. "The ocean knocked the pier down!" they exclaimed. Each student described the power of the waves. Months later, when that class went to the beach none of the students ran carelessly into the water. Some barely got their toes wet while others chose instead of going into the water to run and play tag with the foam and not enter the water at all. The students had learned the strength of the ocean's waves and respected its force.

How much power is there in the ocean? It is a mystery. We can measure only small amounts of it and then guess at the rest. The power in a single wave, let alone a storm or the swells on which our little boats rise and fall, is greater than one imagines from a distance. Enter into the surf and face a breaker only as tall as you are, and your thoughts of your strength being as powerful as even a single wave quickly vanish. Feeling the force of the wave against your body opens just a window into the power within the ocean itself. We learn to be humble in the face of such incredible, continual power.

The sea is a wonderful teacher of humility. Winning confidence in riding a wave or running along its foaming surf without touching the edge of the water, our daring adventure invariably brings moments of truth when the sea wins and we remember our place.

Early one morning as I was walking across the sand toward the surf, I realized the tractor had just passed by pulling the strainer to sift the sand and remove dangerous objects. Where the sand had been sifted, it was clean and very soft. Walking in the soft sand required great effort and slowed my progress. When I stepped into the tracks made by the heavy tractor, I found the sand had been firmly packed and walking was effortless. As I

followed in the tracks, I could go faster with less exertion.

When we follow in the tracks of the One whom God sent to show us the way, teach us the truth and hold up for us the light, we are able to come to God with confidence. When we follow in the tracks of a person who can help us make progress toward faithful living, when we listen to a good teacher, follow the advice of a good doctor, or listen to people who have lived Godly lives, our lives are enriched. We do not have to wait until all mysteries are answered to learn what is right and what is wrong when we humbly follow in Jesus' tracks. What strengthens faith is right. What weakens faith is wrong.

Values have much less to do with external laws than they have to do with inner faith and motivation. Look below the surface of the ocean to find its power, for energy comes from the depths not the surface. The same is true with individuals. Just like the sea, God has put His spirit deep within our hearts, not exposed, not on our sleeves to be seen by all or brushed away. As we follow in the tracks of people whose lives we respect, we can learn as we go what it is like to follow our best understanding of God's will for our lives.

Today and tomorrow you and I are the ones who are making tracks that others may decide to follow. Our footprints may not be visible for long. Time may erode their shape and size. Let us live in such a way so that those who follow will not have to make the same mistakes or have the same difficult experiences we had. Let us hope those who follow us will diverge from our tracks when they see danger ahead.

We have good reason to be humble when we compare our tracks to those of the perfect life of the one human being who lived so close to God that God was always pleased with His choices.

Jesus spent time by the Sea of Galilee. When He was ready for His public ministry, Jesus chose men who knew the sea for His first disciples. When Jesus called those first disciples, He said, "Follow Me and I will make you fishers of men." Those ordinary fishermen could not have imagined how following Jesus would change their lives. To become teachers and healers spending their lives helping others grow in faith in a loving God as well as a God of power was beyond their expectations.

Could Jesus also have been teaching them a lesson from the sea of trust? The sea teaches us to trust God, especially when we cannot see for ourselves. The sailor has to trust his ship, his maps, his ability, his instruments and especially the fundamental truths in God's Creation. The sailor must trust the compass, the stars, and the buoyancy of the waters. If the sailor does his part well, he will be able to plot his course accurately and safely arrive at the chosen harbor.

Scriptures tell about Jesus being so tired he simply fell asleep in the boat while the winds came up; and the waves beat upon the boat; and it began to sink. Those tough fishermen, who were with Him that day, knew the sea well. They fished there everyday and often at

night too. They had a great respect and fear of the sea. They lost confidence in strength of their ship and thought the storm would engulf them all. Still Jesus slept with no fear or alarm. The fishermen woke him out of fear for their lives. They still needed to learn that being with Jesus meant no longer needing to be afraid of wind or waves.

In like manner, we must learn to trust Jesus' example, especially when His footsteps in the sand take unexpected turns. At one place a person cries out for help. Farther on His footsteps lead to talking in a temple courtyard. At other times Jesus moves away on His own to regain strength for His soul from prayer time with His heavenly Father.

How God takes care of His faithful followers is often a deep mystery. The experience of being carried through tough times by faith is attested to by many in whose tracks we today are glad to walk. Humbly, let us put our trust in God as we walk across the sands of time toward that mystifying sea, which continually beckons us to look beyond as well as within ourselves for answers to the unknown.

The mysteries of the sea elude even the best scientific studies known to us. No amount of money or years of study will guarantee that people will someday know everything there is to know about the sea. So it is with each of us. There will always be more we can learn about ourselves, the potential talents and abilities that God has hidden within us. The way we react in a crisis or unexpected success often shows what is deep within us and is seldom shown.

Exposed to the sky, to the ravages of industrial, commercial and residential development, still the sea continues to offer its mysteries to those willing to take the time and risk the effort to understand its deeper truths.

In the first creation story in Genesis, upon which this sermon is based, God made the sea and everything in it and gave man dominion over it. Along with humility and trust, the sea teaches us lessons of respect for every living thing—the fish in the sea and the birds in the air. Life verifies ancient truths. We are closer to God than the birds or the fish. We are like God with the ability to think and dream. We are able to know God and to trust Him with our lives even when we cannot see into the future. God has more respect for you and for me than for the sea. God gave us the ability to communicate and respond to God, to be co-workers with Him in the on-going work of transforming the world into a place where all people and creation are in right relationship with God.

To help us understand some of the mysteries hidden for ages, God sent a Person who loved the sea but loved us more than the sea, its fish and plants. The fish in the sea were there to be caught, to become food for our bodies. God placed within our bodies gifts and talents so some would be teachers, some painters, some engineers, some artisans, some athletes, some doctors and nurses so that together we might enjoy abundant living.

I expect there are many gifts, which God has hidden within you, which are waiting to be

discovered perhaps in these days leading to Easter.

### Ocean

immense yet imminent  
gigantic yet minute  
stretches the ocean from shore to shore  
towering mountains  
mile deep canyons  
all lying beneath that rippling carpet floor  
sky above, life below  
lies the water blue-green water  
steel-grey water whipped white with foam  
come winter gales and summer squalls  
an ever-moving home  
why does it hold such mystery for us all  
such pull of fantasy as well as gall  
bitter sweet its taste  
biting its reflection  
burning in the midday sun  
yet eagerly we explore its edges and its caves  
marvel at its contours and revel in its waves  
nor neglect the sunsets lighting the twilight  
waiting for no one on its descent  
as it merges once more into the horizon  
marking the end to another day  
and yet while gone from view  
from our lone point  
yet coming into view from yours  
around this planet  
day after day  
circles that majestic ball of warmth and light  
giving life, growing nourishment to sustain our bodies  
while all along deep is the song  
heard within our soul and the ocean deep  
that longs for its Maker  
Who can be found both far and near  
that ever-living, ever-loving, ever-creating, ever-renewing  
Sustainer of all that is good and beautiful and true

**Lessons from the Sea—Mystery**

the One Living God of Jesus Christ  
immense yet imminent  
for me and for you.

dlg 2/13/02

Amen.