

“Raw Emotion”

Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

This was such a beautiful Psalm to talk about on Veterans Day, because when you go through and you listen to the stories of the veterans you hear, those who were in battle - the fear, the need; the clawing out for God in their moments of deepest worry; this Psalm - as much as any others in all of the Bible - talks about that need - that urgency - for God in that moment.

So, as I was looking for an opportunity to tell a story about military battle - people needing God in that moment - I didn't quite know where to turn, because I don't know much about military history. So, I went out and grabbed a book. It was a devotional book. It was on, (let me get the title right so if you want to look it up,) it's called "Stories of Faith and Courage from World War 11." I thought, "Great." So, I read through it, and I was kind of bummed out, because there were only about one or two paragraphs for each one, and it didn't go into any detail.

But I read this one [story] as I was flipping through the book and it was about a gentleman named Father Michael Conway. Father Michael Conway was on the USS Indianapolis in WW11. I thought I had heard of that. I think it was in the movie "Jaws." They were talking about this, when they were sitting there, right before Jaws came up and started eating the boat. I will have to read more about this. It was just 2 small paragraphs, so I had to go to the most credible place in the world - the Internet. [Laughter] I went on Google, typed in USS Indianapolis - Father Michael Conway, and did I get a story!

Father Michael Conway was 37 years old, and was fast asleep in his bed, when the first torpedo hit the USS Indianapolis from a Japanese submarine at exactly 12:14 a.m. When the torpedo hit, it hit with such veracity that 300 men went to the bottom of the sea that day, within 12 minutes.

Nine hundred men got out and were floating in the Pacific Ocean for four days. Somehow, along that line, they didn't get the "mayday" out because it all happened so fast, that no one knew where they were, and they had trouble finding these men.

Now, where they were - in that part of the Pacific, off the Philippines - they were struggling with sharks. They banded together in groups in a big circle and held onto each other - bound together - to be as much of a land mass as they could be, to keep the sharks at bay. But over time they [the sharks] would come in and they would get one [soldier] after the other.

Over a period of days, it wasn't just the sharks, it was the dehydration. To have all that water around you and not to be able to drink even a bit of it. And, there was something called "salt-water poisoning." In between the salt-water poisoning, the dehydration and the constant fear of the sharks coming in, they [the soldiers] were literally going insane and having hallucinations.

But there was one man who gave them hope, and it was Father Michael Conway. He would break from the group - where it was safest - and swim from one little group bound together to another. He would share prayers with them. He would remember Scripture and quote it to them to give them comfort. He would call on God to help them in that moment.

Three full days exhausted without any water, some salt poisoning; even more fear of sharks because he was alone swimming from one band of brothers to another. He did that and survived by the will of God, for three of the four days. To hear the men talk, they felt so alone when Father Michael didn't come back.

A sad story because when 300 of the 900 that hit the water that day and were surviving - only 300 were still left on the fourth day when they were finally picked up. Those 300 talked about Father Michael but, because there were almost no officers left alive and only an officer could make a recommendation for the Naval Cross, to this day he is unable to get one because enlisted men were not able to provide for the Cross.

I was touched by that story. I think about the urgency described in Psalm 70, and I thought "Oh, my goodness."

But the story doesn't end there. I kept digging a little bit further. The captain of the USS Indianapolis, whose name is Capt. Charles McVay, was one of the 900 who survived, and one of the 300 hundred that was still living when they pulled them out of the waters, four days later.

Sadly, the United States Navy needed a scapegoat and they court martialed him for not zig zagging, in attempt to avoid the torpedoes. But, after the court martial, Admiral Chester Nimitz stepped forward and said, "This is wrong. There was no way he could avoid the torpedoes." And so, with a number of naval admirals coming forward, they rescinded in some small way, and gave him his life back. He retired four years later, in 1949, as a rear admiral. But, while the Navy forgave him, so many of the seamen's family did not. One of the letters, among the many he received years after that, went something like this:

"Merry Christmas. Our family's holiday would be a lot merrier if you hadn't killed our son."

He received so many of these over so many years that, one day in 1968, he was found in his backyard, dead, with a toy sailor in one hand and a warm revolver in the other. He could not get over the shame that had been thrust upon him so many years before. He carried the burden and, somewhere, he could not hear Psalm 70's promise that God would protect and heal, and wipe the shame away.

God provided for Father Michael but, sadly, Capt. McVay never understood and felt it, but the story wasn't over, I kept digging and I found out there is one more piece to the story.

I don't want to ask everybody out here [Scott pointed out to the congregation], but are there any 6th graders here [sitting up on the chancel]? I want to tell you guys the story because this happened in 1945. He [Capt. McVay] died in 1968. In 1996 there was a young man in 6th grade, named Hunter Scott, from Pensacola, Florida, and Hunter Scott decided, after watching the movie "Jaws" (which he should not have been allowed to watch when he was

in 6th grade) [laughter], saw the part where they were talking about the USS Indianapolis; so he decided to make a class project and looked it up.

Hunter Scott found and went to his dad and said, “Dad, this doesn’t sound right. How come they got this guy in trouble and there was no way that many torpedoes could hit that boat and they blamed him - that they didn’t fully exonerate him?”

Well, sixth-grader Hunter Scott told his teacher and his dad, and he went and told some other people in Pensacola, Florida. There just so happened to be a congressman, a United States Congressman in Pensacola in 1996 whose name is Joe Scarborough, from “Morning Joe” on MSNBC, now. At that time he [Scarborough] was a Republican congressman. Joe Scarborough said, “This is right, sixth-grader Hunter Scott, we need to do something about this.”

So, sixth-grader Hunter Scott went before the United States Congress. Can you imagine? He [Hunter] stood before the United States Congress and read his 6th grade report in civics class to the entire Congress. On that day, they voted to fully rescind what had happened to that Captain on July 31, 1945 - all because of a sixth-grade boy.

That is a story of generations of knowing that when people suffer, and people struggle, God finds a way to restore life. God did that in 1945 with a 37-year-old priest; God did it again in 1996, to restore the family and the legacy of a faithful Captain in the United States Navy and restored his legacy for his family. God found a way to nurture the excitement and interest of a sixth-grade boy to do something important and make a difference in this world and all of you 6th graders, and the rest of us, all have the potential to be used by God for something great.

The last part of this story that little sixth-grade boy in 1996 is now a lieutenant in the United States Navy. He is a lieutenant and a naval aviator, and is now stationed in San Diego, California. Full circle. And we pray that God will continue to bless and keep our military people, and all of us, and will continue to answer the call to urgency in times of greatest need of support in greatest difficult moments; and, to carry us to God’s Eternal Kingdom, whether on the bottom of the sea or on the most barren land. There is no place that God cannot find us and call us home. Amen