



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

BURN THE SHIPS

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ FEBRUARY 17, 2019

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. ²This is what the ancients were commended for.

³By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

⁴By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead.

⁵By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death: "He could not be found, because God had taken him away." For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. ⁶And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

⁷By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith.

⁸By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. ⁹By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who

had made the promise. ¹²And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

¹³All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. ¹⁴People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. ¹⁵If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

Hebrews 11:1-16 (NIV)

An Act of Total Commitment

It happened exactly 500 years ago. A quarter century after Columbus's first voyage to discover Caribbean islands, Spanish military commander Hernan Cortez set sail for the eastern coast of Mexico with a battalion of soldiers. His charge from the Spanish crown was to establish a colony for settlement and trade in the new world. When his troops landed, they were confronted by hostile Aztecs. Their prospects of success looking bleak, the men began to talk wistfully about leaving and returning home to Spain. They longingly pointed at their ships, moored just offshore. So their commander made a bold and heroic decision.

In the middle of the night he ordered a couple trusted men to row out to the ships and set them afire. The stunned soldiers were awakened to the pyrotechnic display and were on the verge of panic, their way of retreat now cut off and their safety net removed. But Cortez gathered them and told them that there was now only one option for them. They would stay, and they would fight, and they would prevail. And they did. Because of their dedication and bravery, Central America soon became a Spanish colony.

We will not engage in a debate today about the pros and cons of European settlement and colonialism. Historians can argue about the

relative merits. It's politically correct today to label Columbus and all who followed him as racists and oppressors. Certainly the Spanish were less than perfect as conquerors and administrators of the native population. And certainly the Aztecs (and the Mayan culture before it) were anything but pure and noble. Their slavery-based economy, their violence and totalitarianism, and their brutal child and virgin sacrifices to their pagan gods and idols (which are conveniently ignored by some modern anthropologists) made life for most Central Americans unimaginably awful. And the Spanish did bring many spiritual and cultural improvements, along with the swords of the conquistadors. But the point we will focus on solely today is the image of "burning the ships." Cortez and his bold action have stood for half a millennium as a symbol of total, unwavering commitment to a cause or goal.

The passage we read from the Book of Hebrews in the New Testament offers us an extended and inspiring account of the people of God who, thousands of years ago, "burned their ships" by trusting in God in spite of all obstacles. We read only a portion of the chapter; it goes on for 34 more verses beyond what we read. Every person listed in this chapter—and countless others throughout biblical times—prevailed because of their faith, their total commitment. They stand as our role models.

Jesus reaffirmed the necessity of commitment. He called people to come to Him and become His followers, and those who were half-hearted in their dedication were told not to bother. The Kingdom of God and the fullness of a life of fellowship with Christ are for those who will surrender themselves to Him, with no looking back or divided loyalties.

This morning we are going to be looking at the image of "burning the ships"—that vivid symbol of commitment—as it has been seen in many different dimensions of life. Not only do we find it in the example of Cortez the Conquistador and the great men and women of the Bible. The necessity of full dedication is seen over and over.

“Burning the Ships” in the influence of Scotland

The pageantry of our annual Kirkin’ of the Tartan services is meant not just to let us hear some bagpipes and see some plaid flags carried by men and women in skirts. It celebrates and reaffirms the values we hold very dear that were introduced to our nation and the world by God’s working through that small nation off the northwest coast of Europe. Scotland’s greatest impact on the world is not found in the northern half of the British Isles. It is global. Wherever the Scots migrated to in the 17th and 18th centuries (the time of the great flowering of the Scottish Renaissance, following hard on the heels of the Scottish or Presbyterian Reformation of the 16th centuries), they took their society-forming values with them. Millions of Scots journeyed to North America, to Australia and New Zealand, to South Africa and to Caribbean islands. They arrived there and committed themselves wholly to building new homes and new communities. Ultimately their influence molded nations.

Here were the central values of the Scots:

- ◆ **Self-governance.** As freedom-loving people, they believed that they were able to most effectively chart their own course. Rather than depending on bishops and clergy in their churches, they elected elders from their midst and vested authority in them. Rather than bowing down to kings and their lackeys, they preferred to choose their own leaders. This conviction profoundly impacted the founding of republics like the United States.
- ◆ **Universal education.** A direct consequence of their commitment to being self-governing people, the Scots knew they had to provide literacy and education to all (not just the nobility, as in the rest of Europe). For if people were to govern themselves, they needed to know the principles of right and wrong and the laws of their God; and to know those laws they needed to read their Bibles; and to read their Bibles they must be educated. This commitment has allowed millions of people of common and lowly birth to raise themselves. It is one of the greatest strengths of our society.

- ◆ **High standards for church leaders.** It may be hard for us to believe, but the moral and spiritual lives of the priests and bishops of the pre-Reformation era were abysmal. Most clergy, theoretically celibate, openly had mistresses and children; alcoholism was rampant; bribery and corruption in the church were commonplace. When John Knox raised a new standard of personal holiness and integrity for all pastors and elders in Scottish churches, the transformation was dramatic.
- ◆ **A Christian work ethic.** The Scots were actually blessed by their comparative poverty, because England and Continental Europe were dominated by an economic system of a few ultra-wealthy landowners and a large mass of serfs and laborers. The system of capitalism and the results of hard work, saving and investing (as articulated brilliantly by Scot Adam Smith) laid the foundation for what we now enjoy as staggering prosperity—the lifting of billions of people out of poverty and want into self-sufficiency and opportunity.

We celebrate and renew our commitment to these values today. And they would have never become widespread and world-changing had not our ancestors the Scots been totally dedicated. They had to “burn the ships” when they left their homeland to start new lives.

“Burning the ships” in the spread of the Christian faith

When Jesus called a group of working-class fishermen to leave their boats behind and become “fishers of men,” it required total commitment. As we look at the gripping history of the spread of the church in the Book of Acts, and in the centuries that followed, we find that same spirit expressed over and over. Sometimes the early Christians paid with their lives for their unwillingness to renounce their faith in the face of persecution and death threats. Sometimes their faith led them to leave the comfort of their home and go to new places, taking the message of the love of Christ with them.

That same “burn the ships” attitude of commitment is what continues to bring spiritual life-change. I read recently about the dramatic breakthrough experienced by a western missionary organization.

Years earlier they had established a Christian hospital in an underserved area of Africa. Their original plan was to rotate doctors and nurses from America and Europe into those hospitals for a month at a time. While they did some wonderful work in healing the bodies of local people, they were unsuccessful in developing a strong church among them. And then a Christian doctor and his wife volunteered to move into that community permanently, to live with the people and build relationships, to raise their family alongside the Africans and pray with them. Only then did the church begin to grow and flourish. Until then, the Africans were standoffish and guarded. They didn't bond with the western medical staff, because they knew they would soon be gone. It was only the total commitment of that doctor, who "burned his ships" to be part of their community, that brought the breakthrough.

"Burning the ships" in our personal lives and relationships

The image of Cortez's bold decision, with its relentless turning from the past, has been meaningful to many people as they have chosen to make necessary changes in their lives, their marriages, and their careers.

- ◆ A person struggling under the grip of alcohol, or tobacco, or a prescription drug, or pornography, chooses to quit. The cigarette packs are thrown in the trash. The bottle is emptied down the drain. A block is put on their internet service. They take the scary but essential step of going to a meeting to be held accountable, or making an appointment with a counselor, or checking into rehab to start the recovery process. You typically don't break an addictive behavior gradually. You need to "burn the ships" and embrace a new life.
- ◆ A widow or widower, stuck in the grief process, makes the decision that they are going to move into the next chapter of life. They decide to empty the closet and drawers of their spouse's clothes, making the trip to the thrift shop. They may even decide to move from a home bigger than they need and start over fresh without the haunting memories surrounding them.

- ◆ A person groaning under a mountain of clutter and unnecessary “stuff” decides to begin to clean it all up and get rid of what is no longer needed. It’s painful. But they open up their rented storage locker and see all those things they haven’t used in five years. It’s time to “burn the ships” and simplify life.
- ◆ A person working paycheck to paycheck in a job they don’t enjoy decides it’s time to take the risk of a career change, in order to find a job they can love.
- ◆ A man or woman who is unhappy in a marriage decides that divorce will not be an option. “For better or worse,” they believe that they have promised to keep working on it. The ships have been burned. They will not give up on the relationship. (Two weeks ago we welcomed filmmaker Alex Kendrick. His unforgettable film *Fireproof* tells the story of what happened when a young husband in a strained marriage decided not to give up, but to rededicate himself to loving his wife in a biblical and sacrificial way.)
- ◆ Coach Lou Holtz, who will be with us in April, tells candidly in his autobiography about his biggest career blunder. A successful college head coach at North Carolina State, he was offered a big paycheck and the glory of becoming coach of the NFL’s New York Jets. He naively thought this would take him to the pinnacle of his profession. But after less than a year in New York, he and his wife recognized their mistake. Lou loved coaching in college, but he didn’t fit well in the very different world of the pros. After one season he resigned, not knowing where he would go next. He had to “burn the ships” of his pro football career in order to get back to the college environment where he could flourish again.

Burning our ships in our relationship with God

Jesus’ call echoes through the centuries: “If anyone wants to be my disciple, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” His call is one-way only. There must be no turning back. We can’t follow Jesus halfheartedly, keeping one foot safely planted in the

world of unbelief and self-interest while the other foot is planted in the world of trying to be a part-time Christian. It doesn't work.

The crucial turning point in the life of the great Billy Graham was his decision to fully trust the Bible as the sole foundation for his ministry. One of his friends, influenced by the scholarly allure of the academic world, had appealed to Billy to give up his antiquated beliefs and place his own reason above the ancient text of scripture. In doing so, the friend assured him, he would be respected by all the smart people. Billy agonized, and then he made a decision and a steadfast commitment. In his autobiography he puts it this way:

I prayed, 'Father, there are many things in this book I do not understand. I can't answer all the questions of the critics. But I am going to accept the Bible as your inspired word, by faith.' A major bridge had been crossed. In my heart and mind I knew a spiritual battle in my soul had been fought and won.

Billy Graham "burned his ships" of doubt and became the man who has led more people to Christ than any other in history.

What "ship" do you need to torch?

None of us are called by God to have that kind of impact. But the call to trust God completely is nevertheless for you and me as well. He wants us to trust Him for our daily bread, and the needs of those we love. He wants us to turn our back on temptations and bad habits and yield our will to conform to His will. He wants to reorder our priorities and purposes. And when we face illness and physical and mental decline—and when we each come to that final test in facing our own death—God wants us to abandon our fears and trust in Him. Burn your ships of doubt and fear and unbelief. Choose to take His promises literally, that Christ has gone before you to prepare an eternal home for you. Keep your eyes on Him.

My final appeal is simply this: Is there something you need to do, some decision you need to make? Is there a sin you need to renounce in order to fully follow your Lord? Is there a ship you need to torch? ■



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