

Carved by the Sea
In Celebration of the 60th Anniversary of Ministry
Of
The Rev. Etta Snow
Humbervale United Church, June 24, 2012

I am honoured to be among you today and to preach on this special occasion of Etta's 60th anniversary of dedicated ministry within The United Church of Canada and I thank your minister, the Rev. Cindy Randall, and other planners of this event for your thoughtful invitation to do so.

Carved by the Sea. If you google Bay Roberts, NL you will see the heading: Bay Roberts: Carved by the Sea.

Look for the tourist attractions and "Mad Rock" will pop up. A few weeks ago, while in Bay Roberts, I took a short drive to the tip of the Bay Roberts Peninsula and viewed the spectacular sight - Mad Rock, indeed – actually, mad rocks, majestic rocks jutting from the ocean close to the shoreline with the waves crashing and clashing in different directions. They were awesome – they are treacherous. The waters surrounding Bay Roberts, like all ocean waters, hold magnificent beauty and, equally, fearful danger. Years ago there were many wrecks in that area.

Renowned poet, E. J. Pratt, also a Newfoundlander, paints a picture of the paradox of the sea in his poem, "Erosion".

**It took the sea a thousand years,
A thousand years to trace
The granite feature of this cliff,
In crag and scarp and base.**

**It took the sea an hour one night,
An hour of storm to place
The sculpture of these granite seams
Upon a woman's face.**
(June 1931)

(E. J. Pratt: Complete Poems; Part One. Ed. Sandra Djwa and R. G. Moyles. University of Toronto Press, Toronto 1989).

It took the sea more than a thousand years to form the majestic, rugged awe-inspiring coastline of Etta's Province of Newfoundland and Labrador and of the Mad Rocks of Bay Roberts. Alas, all too frequently, it takes the sea less than an hour to form creases and cavities upon the coastline of a woman's face – or upon the face of a father, son, lover, mother or daughter. Etta's brother, Sutherland, was the first casualty of Bay Roberts during World War II; he was torpedoed off Wales (September 28, 1948) having recently celebrated his 21st birthday.

The Snow family, thus, knew well both the fearful agony and the compelling attraction of the sea. Etta's father, Philip, after working in the Boston area during the depression years, heard the call of the sea back to Bay Roberts where he became skipper of a schooner that brought men and supplies to Labrador in the Spring and, then, in the fall returned them home. During one of those trips they ran into stormy seas. The schooner was totally wrecked. Fortunately, all of the crew and passengers were saved by another vessel. Still a lover of the sea, Etta's father found employment on a Newfoundland Coastal Boat sailing from North Sydney to Port Aux Basques as a "boson" (boat-swain), akin to a warrant officer on a naval ship. On one of those trips they encountered a huge storm; one of the anchors became loose and landed on his foot, resulting in a crushed ankle and 6 months off work. Child Etta, at 10 or 11 years of age, delighted in having her father home full time instead of 2 – 3 days a month. Her father lamented being away from work and water. Because of his disability he couldn't return as a "boson". He was given the job of supervising the galley and, until his retirement, took great pride in how meals were presented to both passengers and crew.

The poem “Erosion” was written in 1931 – four years after before Etta was born. It could have been written in 2012 or any year before or after 1931. The poem, “Erosion” could have been written during the time of Jesus (the year 30 of the Christian era) or some 40 years later (around the year 70) when Mark wrote his gospel.

It is providential that the gospel lectionary reading for today is a sea story. **When evening came, he said to them, “let us go over to the other side.”** The dark of the evening is not a good time to go anywhere in boat – every fisherperson knows that a lake given to storms, as the Sea of Galilee was, always faces the worse weather when evening comes. **Asleep in the boat** is not a helpful position when a fierce gale of wind arises and the waves are beating into the boat. **Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?** are not encouraging questions when drowning is a likely possibility. What is needed is to pay close attention to a skillful boater and to obey instructions urgently. Jesus’ disciples were understandably afraid. When a boat is filling with water and there is a fierce wind, the immediate response of people of faith and people of no faith is fear.

Scholars tell us that the Sea of Galilee is a large, shallow body of water – it actually is a lake – Lake Gennesaret. As such, it is prone to sudden violent storms when the wind hits it – those storms die down as quickly as they arise when the wind ceases.

Thus, this story may have been a coincidence of time. Jesus was napping in the boat, exhausted after a long day of teaching. The disciples awaken him because it is getting dangerous. He reassured them as the storm stopped – a coincidence of time. The wind died down and the storm ceased with a coincidence of the words, “Peace, be still”.

Regardless of whether you favour this “coincidence of time” explanation or whether you

prefer it as a literal story – a “miracle” story of Jesus controlling the forces of nature - we do know that Mark tells the story with another purpose in mind.

The church community is in crisis at the time of Mark’s gospel, some 30 plus years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ.

At that time, there was the traumatic war of Rome against Israel, resulting in the destruction of Jerusalem and their “holy of holies” - the Temple. There was death and devastation, a sense of hopelessness, anxiety and fear – a death-dealing storm of life. The church community was in peril, akin to drowning on a stormy sea. The promise and hope that Jesus would come again had not occurred. Where was Jesus or God when you needed them the most? Mark’s story gives us the response – God or Jesus is “in the boat” with the people in the midst of the storm. God is with them in the fearful storms of life. People who are “carved by the sea” and, indeed, all of us, do well to become friends with fear.

Picture “young adult” Etta Snow, sent to Stanhope, a small community on the north east coast of Newfoundland, to teach at the age of 18. Etta shares that she was “scared to death” initially in her one-room school of Stanhope because there were 3-4 students in grades 7 or 8 who were in their late teens – close to her age – larger than she was.

Assured by the people with whom she was boarding to let them know if she had any trouble, she relaxed somewhat. It was during that time that her father sent her a letter with the message, “Take time to be holy” – words that have stood the test of time in her books as they are words that she frequently recalls to this day.

Strengthened by her teaching experiences in Stanhope, Shoal Harbour and Bonavista, NL Etta decided to obtain her first grade teachers’ certificate at Memorial University College.

No doubt, “scared to death” described other experiences thereafter. When deaconess and Women’s Missionary Society worker, Ruth Tillman, impressed by Etta’s leadership skills in church and school, spoke to her about attending the United Church Training School, Toronto (now the Centre for Christian Studies, Winnipeg), Etta responded “But I don’t have the education”. For “stalwart woman of the faith” Ruth Tillman the solution to that problem was simple. “Inadequate education?” – go and obtain your academic qualifications. So, while teaching, Etta studied at Mount Allison University, Sackville, NB through correspondence courses. While studying at the United Church Training School Etta required additional courses in Sociology at Victoria University and in Christian Missions at Knox College. They were called “special assignment” courses. Any fears that Etta possessed were offset by her strong sense of call and the courage and strength of her faith. It was a call similar to that of young Samuel with his mentor Saul identifying that the “voice in the night” was, indeed, the call of God. With Etta, it was the voices of strong, courageous women and men of the church who saw in Etta the educational skills that the church relied on and the fortitude and faith that could befriend fear.

Moving from Newfoundland to Toronto in 1950, just 2 years after Confederation was a venture in faith in the midst of fear. It wasn’t her first move off the Island; Etta had already visited her aunt in Boston, flying one way and, because she had spent most of her airfare money, returning home by way of train and ferry, at least a 4 day journey.

In Etta’s last year at the United Church Training School, the Rev. Theodore Tucker and the Rev. Frederico Mussili from the Dondi Mission, Angola, spoke to students of the urgent and challenging needs of Angola. Etta had other thoughts – Trinidad, India – but,

again, the Call, the voice of God spoke through others and Etta responded: **Here am I, send me.**

The first stop on the journey to Angola was Lisbon, Portugal to study Portuguese with other colleagues and classmates. Upon arrival in Angola, again in the midst of her missionary work, there were formal lessons in the native language of Umbundu.

In Angola, the frigid waters of the North Atlantic of Newfoundland found a close connection with the warm waters of the South Atlantic, Angola. Newfoundlander, Millicent Howse, brother of former Moderator, the late Very Rev. Dr. Ernie Howse, was already among the missionaries of Angola and was one of Etta's teachers of the Umbundu language. Millicent's father, the Rev. Charles Howse, was the minister at Bay Roberts when Etta was born and he baptized Etta and her twin brother, Phillip.

Coincidentally, Millicent left for Angola on the day that Etta was born, January 21, 1927. Throughout the years, "befriending fear" was critical to Etta's journey of life and faith. Civil war erupted in Angola – after 22 years Etta and other missionaries were given 12 hours to pack one suitcase and leave. They did so with reluctant heavy hearts. With Angola close to her heart and mind, Etta combined work and studies in Toronto – work as Director of Residence at the Centre for Christian Studies and theological studies at Emmanuel College to meet the academic requirements for ordination, always with the hope of returning to Angola.

She was to return – several times, but not permanently as was her yearning and the yearning of the people she served with compassion and passion in Angola. I had the memorable experience of accompanying Etta to Angola in 2004, Etta's first return trip to Dondi Mission. It was a painful, tearful, joyful reunion for Etta and for her Angolan

friends and colleagues. The former lively community of Dondi was now in war-torn destruction: doors and windows smashed; roofs gone; buildings vandalized; her house and home for 22 years in ruin. There was devastation everywhere except in the faces and voices of the people. Their musical welcome echoes:

Oh, my friends, let us rejoice, let us rejoice!

Dona Etta has arrived, we are so thankful.

Oh, my friends, let us rejoice, let us rejoice!

Her friend has arrived, we are so thankful.

Thank you, God; thank you, God.

With tears of joy, Angolans embrace Etta with the words, “I thought I would never be alive to see you again.” Indeed, the “hopes and fears of all the years” met through the tears and hugs.

“Ondembeleki” – the Umbundu people had called Etta – “Ondembeleki” – the Comforter, named for her fearless, compassionate ministry in frequently dangerous situations in pre-Civil War Angola.

In the midst of faithful, committed ministry to the pastoral charges of Guthrie-Hawkstone, Humber Valley, Brown’s Corners, Westennial, Davenport/Perth, Ontario, Etta’s passion and love for Angola finds expression through the Angola Memorial Scholarship Fund, her friendship with the Angolan community in the Toronto area and in Angola, and hosting of Angolan visitors.

After retirement, Etta was one of the Chaplains who performed weddings at the Old Mill Inn, Toronto – an outreach ministry in itself. Several were interviewed for the position.

In the interview, Etta was asked why she wanted this position. She replied that she would

like to continue to financially support some of the church's rebuilding projects in Angola and, thus, was applying for this work. With that response, the interviewers, in their wisdom, hired her!

Etta, today all of us gather here in your church home of Humbervale United where you already have been recognized as Minister Emeritus and Voluntary Associate Minister for the calibre of your ministry. We gather with countless others as far away as Angola to give God thanks for your witness and work in your province of Newfoundland and Labrador, in Angola, Ontario and other places where your story has touched the lives of numerous people in memorable ways, where echoes of your contagious laughter bring smiles to their faces and joy to their hearts. We thank you. We thank you for your 85 years of robust, courageous living; for 60 years of exemplary ministry filled with passion and compassion.

Why are you afraid? Have you no faith? Yes, indeed, lots of fears and much faith.

“Carved by the sea” – Etta knew and knows that the way of faith is to befriend fear.

Thanks be to God.

Sermon by: Marion Pardy (Very Rev. Dr.)

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