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Holland America Line Cruise Ship MS Statendam

SHIPS IN THE SCRIPTURES

This past month, February 3-17, 2012, I was invited to serve as Guest Clergy on the 14-day Holland America Cruise from Fort Lauderdale, Florida, through the Panama Canal, to San Diego, California.

Cruise lines provide a wide range of activities on board their ships. I want to commend Holland America Line for including, among these activities, the opportunity for people to attend church. My ministry duty was to conduct the Inter-denominational Church Services on the ship. I also conducted Bible Study and Hymn Sings, as well as a special Valentine's Day Celebration in which no less than 61 couples renewed their marriage vows.

Completed in 1914, the Panama Canal is truly one of the greatest engineering wonders of the world—providing a shortcut of as much as 7,000 miles. Over a million ships have passed through the canal and it is now being expanded. But its initial construction came with a great price in human life. It is estimated that a total of 27,609 workers lost their lives, many due to malaria and yellow fever spread by mosquitoes within that jungle environment. Controlling this problem was an essential key to the construction of the canal.

Perhaps because of the extreme loss of life, there were those who questioned whether building the canal should even be attempted. It is said that some quoted the scripture, howbeit out of context: "What God has joined together, let no man put asunder"! (Matt. 19:6).

Because the Panama Canal passes between the continents of North and South America, it is commonly supposed its direction is from *east to west*. But from Limon Bay to Gatun Lake, the canal runs due south, then turns eastward. The Pacific side is actually more than twenty miles *east* of its Atlantic beginning.

There is a saying, "A man, a plan, a canal—Panama." This is one of those verbal oddities, the letters of which are the same forward or backward.

Today's *average* toll for a ship to pass through the Panama Canal is \$54,000. I heard, unofficially, that the toll for our

ship, the *Statendam*, including priority scheduling, was *much* more than this.

Huge ships are capable of carrying many passengers or huge amounts of freight. But they also require huge amounts of fuel, apparently justifying the high cost of toll for the shortcut. During our cruise, fuel consumption for the diesel generators that powered our ship's propulsion motors, was *72 tons* a day!

Guests on the ship numbered 1,368 representing quite a cross section of people: 643 from the United States, 360 from Canada, 75 from the United Kingdom, and 60 from the Netherlands. Others were from Australia, Chile, Germany, Norway, Sweden, etc. In addition to these, there were 560 crew members, most from Indonesia and the Philippines, who will long be remembered for their service, smiles, and friendly attitude.

After leaving Florida, our first church service was somewhere between Cuba and Aruba on the open sea. I was pleased that many people gathered. In addition to our regular church services, I wanted to also have times of hymn singing during the cruise. Among the very first people we met that morning were Glenn and Donna Mumford (see photo next page) who encouraged us in this and passed the word. The Hymn Sings were also listed in the ship's daily paper. Glenn put together a quartet that sang songs like "Victory in Jesus" and "Because He Lives." The ship's hymn books included many great songs of worship and praise. People would call out page numbers of favorite hymns. Arlene and I encouraged everyone to take part, which they did in various ways—with enthusiasm.

The setting for our hymn sings around the piano was interesting in that this area served as a bar at night. I did a variety of songs on the piano—sang and played "Turn Your Radio On" and "Everywhere He Went He Was Doing Good," played a "Chinese" song, and sang in Spanish the words to "I'm So Glad Jesus Lifted Me!" I had learned this at a church camp when I was a teenager. I noticed a crew member, dressed in a suit, who walked toward us. He knew Spanish, knew the song, and then sang it for us! Later when I talked to him, he told me Jesus was "first" in his life.

I was asked to lead a ceremony on Valentine's Day for couples who wanted to renew their marriage vows. In this set-



Arlene and Ralph Woodrow with Glenn and Donna Mumford of Boise, Idaho. Photo was taken right after the Renewal of Marriage Vows Ceremony.

ting, many remembered the popular television series from long ago, “The Love Boat,” starring Gavin MacLeod. Gavin once told me his father said he would never make it as an actor—that he should be a bookkeeper, I believe it was. But he did make it as an actor, obviously, and more recently has done a fine job in the Christian film, “The Secrets of Jonathan Sperry.”

As I spoke at the renewal ceremony, I quoted from the passage in Genesis in which God “blessed” the first couple (Gen. 1:27,28), and pointed out that the words “blessed,” “bless,” and “blessing” appear hundreds of times in Scripture.

The night before, as Arlene and I walked about the ship, we were pleased to see a plaque with the words of “blessing” proclaimed at its launching. Along with asking for the Lord’s protection of the ship, there were words like: “...*To Him acclaim the skies and the earth, the seas, and all that moves....In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.*”

I mentioned how presidents, politicians, and even comedians will use the expression “God bless you.” And on a less-serious note, when we sneeze, we may hear someone say: “God bless you.”

I assured all those couples standing in front of me that even as God blessed the first couple in Eden, he desired to bless them and make them a blessing to each other. I then asked: “Is that your desire?” and they responded, with enthusiasm, “YES.” I then had each husband and wife turn and face each other, and asked:

“Do you love each other?” “YES!”

“Do you want to go into the future together?” “YES!”

While a string ensemble consisting of cello and violins played, each couple then made commitments to each other in their own words, as did Arlene and I. When the music stopped, each couple sealed their commitment with a kiss, with my congratulations! That was a very unique time.

After passing through the Panama Canal, our next port would be Costa Rica where we saw monkeys in trees, crocodiles in swamps, and exotic birds. Continuing on, passing along countries like Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala, our next

port would be Huatulco, Mexico. Prior to this, at sea, speaking to a full house I brought a message I titled,

“SHIPS IN THE SCRIPTURES”

Ships or boats are often mentioned in the Scriptures—over 100 times—from Genesis to Revelation!

In Genesis we read of the first and largest ship in Scripture: Noah’s Ark (Gen. 6:14); and clear on over within the symbolism of Revelation we read of ship captains, sailors, and ships at sea (Rev. 18:17-19).

Certainly not as well-known as Noah’s Ark, is a Jordan River ferryboat

at the time of David. “A ferryboat went across to carry over the king’s household” (2 Sam. 19:18). Earlier under Joshua’s leadership the Israelites miraculously crossed the Jordan on dry ground, as did Elijah and Elisha at a later time (Josh. 3:17; 2 Kings 2:8). But at the time of David a ferryboat was in use.

In New Testament times, it appears a ferryboat was still in use on the Jordan River. This would be easy to overlook until we consider the word *Bethabara*. “Beth” means *house*, providing the basis for places like Beth-lehem (House of Bread), Beth-esda (House of Kindness), Beth-el” (House of God), etc. Beth-abara, means Ferry-House (Strong’s Concordance, 962), implying the existence of a ferryboat at this location on the Jordan River. It was here that John baptized and, upon seeing Jesus, cried out: “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:28,29).

The “Ships of Tarshish,” apparently well-known in their day, are mentioned numerous times in Scripture—more times than commonly realized (2 Chron. 9:21; Psa. 48:7; Isa. 2:16; 23:1, 14; 60:9; Ezek. 27:25).

We recall it was one of these ships that Jonah boarded at Joppa, to go to Tarshish in an attempt to flee from the presence of the Lord. He should have known, from Scripture, that it is impossible to flee from the presence of God, no matter how far one might journey: “Where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in hell, behold, you are there” (Psa. 139:7,8).

There were political and religious reasons why Jonah rebelled at God’s call to go to Nineveh, but why did he choose Tarshish instead? I used to wonder about this, then one day I read 2 Chronicles 9:21 that explains the exports ships carried from Tarshish: gold, silver, ivory, apes, and peacocks (KJV). With a little sermonizing, gold and silver could speak of fame and fortune, ivory of luxury, apes of things vulgar or unclean, and peacocks of pride. When Jonah chose to compromise God’s call on his life, he desired a land of gold, silver, ivory, apes, and peacocks!

When the sailors on the ship finally, reluctantly, threw Jonah overboard and the waters became calm, they offered a sacrifice unto the LORD (Jehovah/Yahweh). In Scripture, sacrifices were

offered in many different places, but this is the *only* account of a sacrifice being offered on a *ship* (Jonah 1:16).

In the New Testament, many of the boats mentioned are connected with the Sea of Galilee. Something about the Sea of Galilee that may be overlooked is that it is *below* sea level. At nearly 700 feet below sea level, it is the *lowest fresh water lake in the world!*

Palm Springs, where we live, is located at the base of Mount San Jacinto. At an elevation of 450 feet, Palm Springs is over 10,000 feet lower than the top of the mountain. Eastward the land gradually slopes to the Salton Sea which is 227 feet *below* sea level. But the Sea of Galilee is over three times lower than this! From it the Jordan River flows on down into the salty waters of the Dead Sea, at over 1,300 feet below sea level, the *lowest* spot on earth.

I felt I was uniquely blessed to have the opportunities to speak on a ship. I recalled the time Jesus spoke on a ship to the multitudes that had gathered on the shore of Galilee (Luke 5:3). That was a much different ship, of course, actually a fishing boat that belonged to Simon. Within a short time he would become a fisher of *men*.

Later Simon Peter and other disciples were on a boat when Jesus came walking on the Sea of Galilee. We all know the story of how Peter also wanted to walk on the water. Years ago a pastor spent forty minutes preaching on, “The Reasons Peter Sank.” While making some good points, his basic premise was incorrect, because Peter *didn’t* sink! In fact, the Bible says “when Peter was come down out of the boat, he *walked on the water*, to go to Jesus” (Mt. 14:25-29).

If he only walked five steps, he *did* walk on the water. He did something the others—who stayed in the boat—didn’t do. But then, “when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and BEGINNING to sink, he cried, saying Lord save me” (verses 30-32).

The Bible says Peter BEGAN to sink. There is a vast difference in merely “beginning” to do something and actually doing it! There is a difference between beginning to sink and being SUNK!

When Jesus and Peter got into the boat, not only did the contrary wind cease, but the boat and all its occupants were *supernaturally* transported to the shore. Though this part of the story is sometimes overlooked, it is clearly stated in the biblical text: “...and *immediately* the boat was at the land” (John 6:21). From the middle of the Sea of Galilee, this would have been a distance of three miles! *Individuals* such as Philip and Elijah experienced supernatural transportation (Acts 8:39; 2 Kings 2:11). But this was unique in that it involved a group of individuals and the boat as well.

Mark’s account tells us that Jesus came to the disciples “walking upon the sea, *and would have passed by them*” (Mk. 6:48; cf. Luke 24:28). Picture the scene. Here are the disciples in the boat struggling against wind and wave. Then they see someone walking on the water, seemingly oblivious to them—with his attention straight ahead, *as though he would pass them by!*

But he did not pass them by! The words of the blind hymn writer, Fanny Crosby (1820—1915), come to mind:

*Pass me not, O gentle Savior,
Hear my humble cry;
While on others Thou art calling,
Do not pass me by.*

For some, a cruise is only a geographical venture. But for those who know the Lord, the Creator of it all, it has a deeper meaning, a *spiritual* dimension, as we see his handiwork. A similar thought was expressed by the Psalmist:

*Those who go down to the sea in ships,
Who do business on great waters,
They see the works of the LORD,
And his wonders in the deep* (Psa. 107:23,24).

It was not uncommon for biblical writers to illustrate their message with wording about ships:

Ezekiel, referring to what would have been luxury ships of that time, spoke of their planks made from fir trees of Senir, the use of cedar from Lebanon for masts, oars made from the oaks of Bashan, inlaid ivory from Cyprus, and embroidered linen sails from Egypt! (Ezekiel 27:5-7).

Isaiah used terms like: “...galley with oars ... majestic ships passing by...tackle is loosed...strengthen their mast... spread the sail” (Isa. 33:21-23).

The writer of Proverbs spoke of “the way of a *ship* in the midst of the sea” and of “merchant ships...bringing food from afar” (Prov. 30:19;31:14)

The tragedy of alcoholism is likened to “one who lies down in the midst of the sea, or like one who lies at the top of the mast, saying, They have struck me, but I was not hurt...when shall I awake, that I may seek another drink?” (Prov. 23:34 NKJV).

Those on board a ship in stormy waters are said to “reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man” (Psa. 107:27).

Ship-related terms mentioned or referred to in the Scriptures include: voyage (Acts 27:10), mariners (Jonah 1:5), ship pilots (Ezek. 27:29), the governor of a ship (James 3:4), shipmen (Acts 27:27), battleships (Eze. 30:9), helm (James 3:4), rudder (Acts 27:40), stern (Acts 27:29), as well as oars, sails, masts, and anchors.

Our hope—our assurance in Christ—is as “an *anchor* of the soul, both sure and steadfast” (Heb. 6:19).

Paul, who often traveled by ship in his missionary journeys, wrote of “perils in the sea...three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep” (2 Cor. 11:25). Having had such experiences, it is weighty when he makes a spiritual application about some who are “tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine” and of others who have *shipwrecked* their faith (1 Cor. 4:14; 1 Tim. 1:19).

Today’s ships with radar, modern instruments, and satellite communication, can accurately determine location, ocean depth, the position of passing ships, and weather conditions. The situation was much different in the days of Paul. Sailors dreaded winter storms, not only because of rough waters, but storms obscured the stars by which alone navigation was possible.

The Romans considered sailing after September 15 as doubtful and after November 11 as suicidal. So we read in Acts: "...and when sailing was now dangerous, because the fast [Day of Atonement] was now already past" (Acts 27:9). The Day of Atonement would have been late September or October. Nevertheless, despite the danger, and contrary to Paul's advice, the owner of the ship wanted to sail further, seeking another harbor where they could "winter" (verse 12). But a drastic storm was encountered, and for many days they could see neither sun nor stars (verse 20).

The number of people on that ship sometimes goes unnoticed. There were 276 (Acts 27:37). It would appear that all had given up, but one man among them—Paul—gave a message of hope. The Lord revealed to him that though the ship would be destroyed, there would be no loss of life. "*Be of good cheer... for there stood by me this night the angel of God, whose I am, and whom I serve, saying, Fear not...*" (Acts 27:22-25).

They escaped to the island of Malta (Melita) where tragedy turned to blessing among the native inhabitants. "And after three months we departed in a ship of Alexandria, which had wintered in the isle, whose sign was Castor and Pollux" (Acts 28:11). Apparently the writer of Acts found it of some interest to mention that the twins Castor and Pollux provided the logo for the shipping company that carried Paul to Rome. In mythology Castor and Pollux were considered the patrons of sailors.

Many of our great hymns and gospel songs have mentioned ships and related things, like storms at sea:

*When the storms of life are raging, Stand by me...
When the world is tossing me, like a ship upon the sea
Thou Who rulest wind and water, Stand by me...*

* * * * *

*I was sinking deep in sin, far from the peaceful shore,
Very deeply stained within, sinking to rise no more,
But the Master of the Sea, heard my despairing cry,
From the waters lifted me, now safe am I.*

* * * * *

*Blessed quietness, holy quietness,
What assurance in my soul!
On the stormy sea, Jesus speaks peace to me,
How the billows cease to roll!*

* * * * *

*In times like these you need a Savior
In times like these you need an Anchor;
Be very sure, be very sure
Your anchor holds and grips the Solid Rock!*

* * * * *

*I've anchored my soul in the "Haven of Rest."
I'll sail the wide seas no more;
The tempest may sweep over the wild, stormy deep,
In Jesus I'm safe evermore.*

Still other songs would include "Throw Out the Life Line," "Let the Lower Lights Be Burning," "I'm Gonna Take a Trip in the Good Ole Gospel Ship" and, by Stuart Hamblen, "This Ship of Mine."

John Newton (1725-1807), captain of a slave ship, was an admitted wretch. But during a turbulent storm at sea, when it seemed all hope was gone, he turned to God. The ship made it safely to land and home. Newton went on to become an effective pastor. He also wrote hymns, the best-known being "Amazing Grace," which reflects his own spiritual transformation:

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.*

*Thro' many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.*

According to the *Guinness Book of Records*, George Beverly Shea, who turned 103 this past month (February 1, 2012), holds the world record for singing in person to the most people ever—an estimated total of 220 million. Much of this was due, of course, to his association with the Billy Graham Crusades beginning in 1947. One of his beloved songs was "Ship Ahoy!" ("Ahoy" is a nautical term used to get attention, a call to hail a ship.)

*I was drifting away on life's pitiless sea,
And the angry waves threatened my ruin to be,
When away at my side, there I dimly descried,
A stately old vessel, and loudly I cried:
"Ship ahoy! Ship ahoy!"*

*'Twas the "Old Ship of Zion" thus sailing along,
All aboard her seemed joyous, I heard their sweet song;
And the Captain's kind ear, ever ready to hear,
Caught my wail of distress, as I cried out in fear:
"Ship ahoy! Ship ahoy!"*

*The good Captain commanded a boat to be low'red,
And with tender compassion He took me on board;
And I'm happy today, all my sins washed away
In the blood of my Savior, and now I can say:
"Bless the Lord! Bless the Lord!"
From my soul I can say "Bless the Lord!"*

Offerings for the support and continuation of this ministry will be gratefully received.

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