

**THE PARABLE OF SURPRISE ROCK**  
**November 22, 2009**  
**Christ the King Sunday B**

**Texts: [ include ]**

Several years ago, when my daughter Katie was in high school, we took a family trip that took us to Virginia Beach and back. We made a planned stop in Beckley WV where we planned to take a whitewater rafting trip on the New River. My wife, Mary, and I had both done whitewater rafting trips; but we had never done such a trip as a family.

After staying overnight in Beckley, we drove to the rafting company in the early morning. There were about 35- 40 people in our group and we divided into "Mild" or "Wild" (Explain) Out of these groups, we were split up into groups of 6 – 8 and assigned to certain River Guides. Each guide met with us and gave us some initial instructions before we boarded the buses that would take us to the river. We were warned to listen to our guides at all times since the whitewater on this trip would range between 2 and 5. For those of you who have never been whitewater rafting, rapids are rated on a scale of 1 and higher; 1 being relatively calm. Most Olympic whitewater competitions are done in rapids that are rated 5 & 6. So the fact that this river would have some level 5 rapids was rather significant. We were also warned that if at any point we ended up in the river in the midst of the rapids, we were to rely on our safety vests, lean back, bend our knees and use our legs to kick off of any objects that we might encounter.

We arrived at the river and began to take our rafts down to the water. We eagerly climbed into our rafts and pushed off into the river. I was in the front right, Katie was right behind me, and Mary right behind her. We were third in a group of six rafts. This part of the river was rather calm, so our guide ran through the set of instructions one more time. She warned us that there would be times in the river when we would have to hand on tight to the raft with our legs while we paddled to the sides as fast and as hard as we could. She then began to tell us that early in this trip, we would encounter a spot in the river called surprise rock. We asked why it was called surprise rock. She responded with a smile saying, "you will find soon find out".

With the river still relatively calm, she told us to look ahead as the two rafts before us passed through surprise rock. We watched as the first raft approached the whitewater – dive down into the water and then dive up throwing all six rafters and their guide into the river. Our guide told us not to worry, that the guide of that raft loved to dump his passengers onto the river. We watched as the second raft hit the rapids, dive down into the river – dive back up again with all passengers intact. Our guide assured us that the secret to staying in the raft at surprise rock was to hit it straight on.

Soon it was our turn. Our guide aimed our raft directly at the center of the rapids and shouted out to us to stroke. Feverishly each of us began to stroke with all of our might. We actually never saw a rock. What we saw was the water dive down before us then

back up over an object that we assumed was the rock. What we soon experienced was the raft diving down, then up with amazing force, propelling us into the air.

Sad to say, we did not hit the rapids head on. We were slightly right of center. And within moments the raft, its passengers, the paddles, and all loose objects in the raft went flying in all kinds of directions. The next thing I remembered was being in the river, under the water, pushing up to the surface, and assuming the position.

My first instinct was to look for Katie and Mary. I saw Mary very quickly, but couldn't find Katie. It turns out she landed underneath the overturned raft. It was not a pleasant experience for her. Fortunately the guide was trained to right the raft very quickly and Katie was out from under it very quickly. One by one we made our way back into the raft and helped each other back in. One we were all safely back in the raft, missing a few loose objects from the raft, but fortunately with all paddles in hand, our guide said to us, "Now you know why they call it SURPRISE ROCK".

I need to add that this was not the last set of rapids we faced. Fortunately we were able to other without landing in the river. However, the experience was traumatic enough for Katie that when we broke for lunch half-way through our trip, Katie made it perfectly clear that she was not going to continue with this trip. The only thing that stopped her from walking away was the fact that the embankments on either side of the river at this point were too steep to crawl out. She has vowed never to go whitewater rafting again.

To me, guiding a raft down a river is a lot like guiding a congregation. Sometimes the waters are rather calm, times when everything seems easy and guiding the craft is rather easy. Sometimes the waters run fast and furious, times when it seems everybody has to work hard just to keep the raft upright. Other times the waters are churning. Just like some people want their raft trip mild, while others want it wild, so it is with the church. Some of us like our experience of church to be rather mild wanting to keep things calm with no surprised. Others like our experience of church to be rather wild, wanting things to be exciting and with great variety. The challenge to church leadership is that typically, you have both kinds of extremes in every congregation.

Some of us like to be like river guides – having the power to control the direction in which the church is going and instructing others what to do. Some of us like to be in the front of the raft – surveying the river before us and warning other what is to follow. Still others like to be in the middle – comforted by the guidance of others. A successful raft trip requires that everybody is working hard to accomplish the same goals. The more people you have that are just along for the ride, the more difficult the work for others. So it is with guiding a church. Some people are willing to do their part, while still others are along just for the ride.

While guiding a raft, it is absolutely important that everybody be stroking in the same direction. If some are paddling forward while others are paddling backwards, the only path the raft takes is in circles. So it is with guiding a church. Some want the church to

go in one direction; still others want the church to in the opposite direction. What you often end up with is a church that is going nowhere.

Good communication is absolutely essential to guiding a raft. If a guide doesn't warn you of the dangers that might be ahead, or tell you when to paddle or not to paddle, it inevitably leads to chaos. But good communication isn't just the responsibility of the guide. It is also the responsibility of all who are in the raft for some might see something in the river that the others do not. So too it is with the church. Good communication is absolutely essential for a church with the input of all of its members.

There are inevitably some surprises in whitewater raft trips. You try to avoid them whenever possible. However, sometimes you just get flipped over and dumped into the river. It requires teamwork to get everybody back into the raft and moving forward again. So too it is with the church. Sometimes things happen that come out of nowhere, leaving members lost and confused. The challenge is to get things right again with the hope that no one gives up and everybody gets safely back on board.

You never want to take a trip on the river without a plan. Everyone should know where you are going to jump into the river and where you are going to get out. You want to know where some of the dangers are and how you might navigate through them. Every stroke you take prepares you for the next part of the challenge. You want to know that everyone is committed to navigating the river safely and together. Just putting your raft in the river without a plan is a formula for disaster. So it is with the church. No congregation moves forward without a clear plan, a clear vision of where it wants to be going. You want to be aware of what some of the dangers might lie ahead and how you are going to get through them. Every decision is made consistent with that plan. Every decision prepares you for the next step of the journey. Moving forward and making decisions without a clear vision is a congregation's formula for disaster.

This morning, we celebrate Christ the King Sunday. It is a celebration of Jesus Christ as the ultimate guide in the river of life. Life is never follows a course that is straight. That is true for individuals; that is true for families; that is true for congregations. Sometimes the journey is calm and sometimes it is turbulent. Sometimes there are surprises that seem to come out of nowhere and turn our lives upside down. Sometimes we want to believe that we are totally in control of the course of lives. Sometimes we feel as if we have no control. Sometimes we feel as if we are in the raft all alone. Sometimes we feel the support of others around us. Sometimes we move forward with a clear sense of direction of goals; sometimes we wander about aimlessly.

In order for us to safely navigate this river, when need to know where Christ is leading us. Not only do we need to know where Christ is leading us, we also need to trust the direction into which we are lead. A life that is lived with Christ as guide and king is usually more able to navigate the turbulent waters of life. Sometimes it is difficult to surrender control to God and yet we are not always the best navigators in our lives.

To say that Christ is our King is to say that we commitment ourselves to the follow the vision that God presents for our lives. To say that Christ is our King is to trust in the direction we are led. To say that Christ is our King is to say that we are willing to follow Christ as our guide in pursuit of that vision.