

THE MESSAGE IN THE BOTTLE*

The entrance of your words gives light... (Psalm 119:130) NKJV

Once upon a time there was an island. The inhabitants were the descendants of the survivors from a shipwreck that had happened so long ago no one could remember the details. Alone in a vast ocean, these castaways settled down to form their own culture. Now, many generations later, these islanders had no knowledge of their true identity and had lost all memory of their true home. Their world was defined by the limits of their island. No one knew what lay beyond the horizon. You could say their island was an I-land, where everyone lived for himself. There was nothing else.

One day a bottle washed up on the beach. An islander picked it up and saw that a scrap of paper was inside. Opening the bottle, he read a three-word message: "Help is coming." The islanders didn't even know they needed help. What could the message mean? Who could have sent it? Someone they didn't know was telling them something they weren't even aware they needed.

A week later another bottle washed ashore... then another, and another. Over a period of several weeks a dozen bottles floated to shore, each one containing a short message: "We will arrive soon. Don't despair." "Trust in your coming deliverance." "A beautiful kingdom is waiting for you on the mainland." "Be patient and keep your eyes on the eastern horizon." "Until we come, treat one another with love and respect." Etc.

Some dismissed it as a hoax. "Someone is playing a trick on us," they said. Others became fixated on scientific analysis. What kind of paper was used? What kind of ink? What was the chemical makeup of the bottles? Others sought to give a "natural" explanation. "Our own ancestors must have imagined other people living over the horizon that needed help. They sent these messages from this island and now the bottles have floated back."

A few islanders, however, took the messages seriously and believed what was written. The words touched something deep within them, awakening longings they never knew they had. "There is a mainland," they concluded. "And someone over there cares for us and is planning to come and take us to a world much bigger than the one we know." These believers began to meet on Sunday mornings on the beach to re-read the messages and seek to understand how the words impacted their daily lives. Watching the eastern horizon, they wondered if this might be the day when help would come.

Friend, God has a message for you today. His words are found in the Bible. He wants to deliver you from your I-land and make you a citizen of his glorious kingdom. Let his words awaken hope and instill faith. Help is on the way.

If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. (C. S. Lewis. Mere Christianity, p. 106).

Pastor Stan

*The basic idea for this story comes from Walker Percy via Eugene Peterson (*Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity*, Eerdmans, 1987, pp. 93-99).