



“Outside the Boat”
Scripture – Matthew 14:22-33
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, August 13, 2017

In the early days of the church, followers of Jesus embraced the ship as a key symbol for the Christian Community. You see, the church saw itself as a community on a mission. Just like the ark of Noah, the church was on a journey to carry the good news of salvation to a “deluged world.”¹

But the metaphor did not *only* speak to the Christian Community’s sense of call. The ship was also a symbol of safety for a church swimming in the troubled seas of persecution. Like in the story of the flood, the ark of the church ferried believers through waters that threatened to overwhelm or consume them.

The ship was an apt metaphor for the church, particularly in those early days when Christian faith left believers vulnerable to the cruelty of Rome. Still, for centuries, this symbol carried such power for our spiritual forbears that it inspired etchings of boats on the walls of Christian tombs and paintings of ships to adorn our sacred spaces. This metaphor was so common that it even gave rise to a name for our primary gathering space — a name that churches still use today. The central part of our sanctuary (where many of you are sitting) is called the Nave, from the Latin word for ‘ship.’

So, here we are, like our sisters and brothers of ages past, gathered in the ship that ferries us through the stormy seas of this world.

Of course, the waters we navigate are very different from the ones that led those early believers to embrace this symbol for the Christian community. But, the metaphor still holds water. The church continues on a journey to bear the good news of Christ’s love to a world that – especially today – seems overwhelmed by fear, and bigotry, and hatred.

But — I wonder — how often the *second* dimension of this metaphor is the one to which we cling. How often do we think of the church — *not* so much as a community on a mission — but as a symbol of safety, a refuge from the stormy seas? How often are we tempted to batten down the hatches and weather the storms of this world from the sanctuary of our ship?

This happens to be where we meet Christ’s followers in today’s story from Matthew. That first Christian community — the Twelve Disciples of Jesus— are huddled in a boat far from shore, as the waves crash against the hull. Jesus has sent them on their way — across the Sea of Galilee — so that he might claim a few hours alone

¹ See: “The History and Symbolism of Church Buildings,” <http://www.stpeteroshawa.com/articles/how-a-church-came-to-be>

to pray. But the wind is fierce and the waters rough. So, before long, the disciples find their battered boat in the middle of the lake, with the winds against them.

The curious thing, is that the Twelve are not afraid ... at least not yet. This is not like their last journey across the Sea of Galilee — when a windstorm swept across the waters and churned the waves until they crashed against the boat. You know the story: Fearing for their lives, the disciples shook Jesus awake and demanded, “Lord, save us!” And Jesus, being Jesus, got up and rebuked the Sea. And the wind ceased and the waves calmed, and the lake returned to glass ...

But now — during *this* voyage — the Twelve are uncharacteristically calm, even *without* Jesus there to still the storm. This is not an oversight on Matthew’s part. The Gospel writer mentions fear four times in these twelve verses. If the disciples were afraid of the wind and waves, we would know. But, at this point in the story, the twelve are cool and collected. For they are safe in the sanctuary of their ship.

It is not until Jesus appears before them, walking on water, that the disciples cry out in fear. It seems they have forgotten from their last adventure at sea that Jesus has proven himself Lord over the wind and waves. For they do not consider that the figure standing before them could be their teacher and friend. “It is a ghost!” they cry out, as terror overwhelms them.

But Jesus, being Jesus, immediately calms their fears. “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid,” he says to this community of bumbling — but beloved — disciples. “It is I; do not be afraid.”

And *this* is the moment when things gets interesting ... When this becomes *more* than a story of Christ’s supernatural power, of his sovereignty over the watery chaos. This is the moment when the camera spins around and focuses on those *who follow* the One who stills the storm and walks on water.

Enter Peter. That ever-eager disciple who acts before he thinks, and usually gets into trouble for it. As he so often does, Peter springs into action: “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”

And, with a single word, Jesus does. “Come,” he commands this disciple. So Peter steps from the boat and begins walking toward Jesus on the troubled waters of the sea.

There are many pastors and scholars and students of Scripture who have criticized Peter for the request he makes of Jesus. Particularly given Christ’s words of reproach when he rescues Peter from the waves, these interpreters have rebuked this disciple for testing the Lord.

But, I don’t see it that way. I don’t think Peter asks to walk on water because he doubts the figure standing before him. Quite the opposite. I think it is the presence of Christ that compels this disciple to step from the safety of the boat and to draw near to his Lord. It is Peter’s faith in the One who stills the storm and walks on water that gives him courage to follow Jesus into the troubled waters of the sea.

Of course, we know Peter’s courage soon wavers. It doesn’t take long for him to realize the magnitude of Christ’s call to step outside the boat. Peter shifts his focus from Jesus to the wind that still whips around him, and — once again — fear overtakes him. Beginning to sink, he cries out: “Lord, save me!” And Jesus immediately reaches out to rescue this drowning disciple from the waves. “You of little faith,” Christ chides “Why did you doubt?” *Why did you doubt that I would give you the power to walk on water? Why did you doubt that I would give you all you need to follow me?*

The raging winds and crashing waves of our lives look very different from the ones that battered the disciples’ boat as it made its way across the sea. Yet, when we gaze out from our ship onto the troubled waters of this world,

we still see Jesus — barely visible in the half-light of dawn. He might not look like an apparition walking on water; but Christ’s appearance among the waves is just as surprising.

Today we glimpse Christ in the man striving to overcome addiction, who makes his way to Westminster every week for his Narcotics Anonymous meeting. Or in the child from Urban Promise, whose reward for good behavior is to stay *longer* at the after school program, rather than returning home. Or in the Guatemalan woman who is struggling to feed her family, after she was denied an education and a fair shot in life. In too many cases, these people are drowning in the waves of an opioid epidemic, of economic injustice, of rampant inequality.

We see these waves all around us. The question is: Will the presence of Christ compel us to leave the safety of our ship to brave the troubled waters of this world? For Jesus still calls us to follow, just as he called Peter to step outside the boat.

And — I dare say — if we’re looking for an example of a faithful response to Christ’s call, we need look no further than our youth.

As many of you know, nine of our high schoolers (along with six adults) embarked on a journey to Guatemala earlier this summer. Needless to say, this adventure required these disciples to heed Christ’s call and step outside the boat. During their week, these youth and adults let go of their safety nets and embraced the people of a foreign land. And, in doing so, they encountered the troubled waters of injustice, as they met with indigenous women who have been pushed to the margins because of their gender, their ethnicity, and their social status.

But they also came face to face with Jesus as he stood amidst the crashing waves. If you followed the blog while these disciples were in Guatemala, you read stories of transformative and holy encounters. As two of our youth reflected: “We can say we have truly seen God all around us in our Guatemalan brothers and sisters. We have learned ... that God is not just in the words of the Bible and the voice of a preacher, but in the people we meet and the experiences that we share with them.”²

But, Sisters and Brothers, we need *not* travel to far-away lands to follow Christ into the troubled waters of this world. There are children right here in Wilmington who need a mentor. And families experiencing homelessness who yearn for the comfort of a home-cooked meal. And members who can’t join us for worship who long to be remembered with a note or a visit. Here at home, there are tears in the fabric of our common life that we are called to mend, and there are broken communities we are called to help reconcile.

The figure of Jesus walking toward us on the sea compels us to step outside the boat, and to brave the troubled waters of this hurting world. The calling is not always easy. But when the waves threaten to overwhelm us, Christ is there saying, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” And, just as he did for Peter, he will reach out a hand to deliver us from the stormy sea.

So take heart. Do not be afraid. And listen to the voice of our Lord. For the church is on a mission; like our ancestors in the faith, we are on a journey to bear the good news of Christ’s love to a deluged world.

So, come. Let us all heed the call of Jesus and step outside the boat.

² Ethan Bradley and Patrick Keenan, “Fun with our Guatemalan friends!,” <https://wpcguatemala.wordpress.com/2017/06/25/fun-with-our-guatemalan-friends/#more-285>

Prayers of the People ~ Susan Moseley

In the beginning, O God, your Spirit swept over the chaotic deep like a wild wind and creation was born. In the turbulence of our lives and the unsettled waters of the world today, let there be new birthings of your Spirit.

God of Abundance, our hearts are full. We thank you for all that you have entrusted to us: for the earth that feeds us, and the air that fills us, for the sun that gives us life, and the water that overflows our cups. We thank you for the new birth that is today.

God of Compassion, we hold in your healing presence those who suffer pain and ill-health and those who care for them...May they know the deep peace of Christ. We hold in your healing presence those who suffer in mind and spirit...May they know the deep peace of Christ. Loving God, we hold in your healing presence and peace the community of Charlottesville and the campus of UVA. The noise of hatred echoes across this country. May they, the rioters and protesters, may we, the appalled...the fearful...the indifferent, may all of us know the deep peace of Christ.

O God, we are inspired, through your word preached to us this morning to step out of the safe boat that is the church, to meet Christ out there...in the face of the other. As you call us toward meaning and purpose, help us to walk across turbulent waters toward your redeeming and transforming love.

God of mysterious ways, you take our fears and turn them into triumphs. You remind us that you are always with us and that we do not need to *fear* the wind and waves of life. Lead us then, Lover of the Deep, away from the safety of surfaces, out into the dark waters of divine blessing.

And now, enfold all our prayers into your sacred purposes. We ask this in the strong name of Jesus who taught us to pray, saying...

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name,
thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.**