

A Sermon for the 10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, August 9, 2020  
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*Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."*

*Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." Matthew 14:22-33*

Imagine with me, for a moment, being in the boat with the disciples, in the night. Enter into the gospel story with me and feel the wind whipping around you and the cold water sloshing over the sides of the boat. Picture the total darkness, so dark that you cannot see your hand held out in front of you. Notice the scent of salt and dead fish in the bottom of the boat. Sense your very real fear that you are about to drown.

Then imagine seeing a shape you do not recognize walking toward you out of the darkness, walking lightly over the tumult of the raging waters that threaten to wash you away. You exchange one fear for another, thinking you see a ghost, as you lose all ability to cope with reality, with fear, with life.

So often, this is where we stop our imagining – in the fear and uncertainty of life, in chaos and pain of loss, in the unpredictability of change. We are so focused on the fears of life, that roll into our lives over and over like churning waves, that we cannot see that what will save us, the One who will save us, is walking toward us with hand outstretched to hold onto us in the storm.

In ancient days the sea was a terrifying place of chaos, believed to be the one part of creation that had not been tamed by God. In an age when everyone believed in sea monsters and an earth so flat that you could sail right off the edge, it took great courage to set sail in a wooden boat. Ancient sailors had to trust in God and in each other, just as we are trusting God and each other right here in this boat we call the Church, in an age when we are not sure what is going to appear next on the horizon, in a world that seems filled with chaos and terrifying things.

When we imagine the Church to be a boat, then it makes perfect sense that we are floundering right now when we've been unable to be together in this boat for so long, and some of us are still not able to safely return. But perhaps like Peter, we are learning that Jesus is with us whether we are in or out of the boat. Maybe we are beginning to understand that the boat is more than we thought, that the Church is more than the building. Sometimes the storms will toss us out of the boat. Other times we impetuously step out of the boat, filled with our own self-assurance or pride. And sometimes we leave the boat because we don't think Jesus is truly in the boat with us or we are unable to recognize Jesus when he's right next to us.

It's easy to think Jesus is not there, it's easy not to recognize him when we are in the middle of the chaos and the waves are crashing over us. We also think we know what the boat is supposed to look like, where the boat is going, and who should be in the boat with us. Perhaps things that happen in life teach us that everything changes, even the way we imagine the boat. And this can be scary, it can bring fear and anxiety and a whole ocean of related emotions. And when emotions threaten to drown us, we sometimes

have a need to test – it’s a way of knowing whether or not we are safe. We test the system, we test one another, we test Jesus. We need to know that God is God.

I suspect that Peter, and the other disciples, just needed to know that God is God. They were caught in a powerful storm and had every reason to be afraid. And as disciples, we too may become fearful in the storms of life. Sometimes we might even be like Peter and our emotions become too much for us to handle.

Frightened and sinking – we’ve all been there.

Take a moment to think about what is going on around you. Name the storms on your horizon, or even the ones crashing over your boat right now. Be still. Can you see Jesus walking toward you, walking over the waves that are threatening to drown you? Can you hear him saying, “Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid.”

We might be tempted to test Jesus, as Peter did – Lord, if it is you, if you are really God then fix this, save me! Even when our motives might be selfish, that won’t deter Jesus – he will continue walking toward us. Even when, in our testing, we may get a lungful of sea water, lose sight of the horizon, or leave the stronghold of the boat, Jesus will save us from our destructive thoughts and actions. Even when, in our fear, we cannot see that God is God and we are not.

In response to Peter’s fear, notice that Jesus didn’t tell Peter to keep his eyes on him and swim harder. No, Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him and put him back in the boat. Jesus will not let us go. Jesus is with us whether we are safe in the boat, or walking on the crashing waves of life. Jesus will grab hold of us when we falter and will save us. Even when we have only a little faith.

In our own lives and in the Church we will over and over find ourselves experiencing the tension between doubt and faith, fear and trust, despair and hope. What is constant and eternal is the presence of God, and the assurance that God is always walking toward us.

This the promise at the heart of this story, the promise of the Gospel, and the promise of our faith: that God will never give up, that God is with us, and that God, in the end, will do what we cannot. In these days of anxiety and fear, that is what helps us take heart and trust in God’s care for us, that is what helps us manage our fear and trust in God’s faithfulness.

In these chaotic times when the waters rage and our anxiety and fear threaten to drown us, what if we don’t stop our imagining in the midst of the fear? Can we intentionally take time to be still and imagine Jesus walking toward us, over the raging waters, over the anxiety and fear that threaten to drown us? Can we remember what God has promised?

The ministry we do inside of this boat prepares us for ministry outside of the boat.

We are given more than we need to be disciples out on the seas of the world, sharing the love of Jesus, and facing any chaos with the certainty that God is in control. We’re all in this boat together – physically or online or connected in our prayers. There are lots of folks out there on the water with us, all splashing around in swells of fear and winds of uncertainty. Surprisingly, this is what links us to one another. Perhaps these last months have helped us to see that even when we could not be here in the boat together, that all along we have been walking with Jesus, reaching out our hands and catching others. May it remind us that yes, even with little faith, many mistakes, and in the chaos of this world, Jesus is always walking toward us. Amen.