

Out of the Boat

Preached FCCW August 9, 2020

Matthew 14:13-22

In the Viet Nam war film “Apocalypse Now”, there is a scene when two crew members of an American gun boat have left the safety of the boat to scout some unfamiliar jungle along the riverbank. Suddenly, they are confronted—not by Viet Cong guerrillas—but by a man-eating tiger. They somehow manage to outrun the tiger back to the boat. As the boat speeds away from shore, one of the soldiers who just narrowly escaped keeps repeating breathlessly to himself— “Never get out of the boat! Never get out of the boat!” I imagine Peter might have had a similar conversation with himself as his attempt to walk on water to Jesus quickly began to look like a really bad idea. “Never get out of the boat! Never get out of the boat!”

Flashback to the previous day. Peter and the other disciples had witnessed Jesus feeding a crowd of more than 5000 with just a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish. Afterwards, Jesus told his disciples to cross the Sea of Galilee in a boat, while he remained behind on a mountaintop to pray in solitude.

One day on our Holy Land pilgrimage, we piled into a boat that took us out on the Sea of Galilee. Our journey was blessed with warm sunny weather. The only sounds were the gentle slap of the waves on the ship’s wooden hull, and the rustle of the gull’s wings as they circled overhead hoping for scraps of food. Our guides assured us though that storms can and do arise without warning on the Sea of Galilee. And as suddenly as that tiger sprang from the brush in the movie scene, a violent storm descended on the boatful of disciples. It came during the darkest hour of the night, just before the dawn. They were on their own, with Jesus nowhere in sight. Then, as unexpectedly as the storm had risen to threaten them, they spotted Jesus coming to their rescue through the storm. Not in another boat. But walking across the water. At first, they were terrified. They thought it was a ghost. Or perhaps the Grim Reaper about to drag them all down to Davy Jones’ Locker on the sea bottom.

Lifeguards will tell you that the first objective when rescuing a drowning swimmer is to relieve their panic, because a panicked victim will struggle against their rescuer in a way that can spell disaster for them both. Following the cardinal rule of lifeguarding, Jesus called out to the disciples, “Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid.” Peter responded, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”

Maybe Peter didn’t trust the evidence of his own eyes. It could be that his “if it is you” was an expression of doubt. Or, it might have been something else. The Greek expression translated “Lord if it is you” could also mean “*since* it is you.” Peter might have been saying, “Lord, *since* it is you, command me to come to you across the water.” Since it really is you Jesus, if you command me to come to you across the water, I know it will be possible, even if I am shaking in my sandals every step of the way.

“Come,” said Jesus to Peter. And Peter stepped towards him. This was not the first time Jesus had beckoned Peter to step out of a boat and come to him. Just a couple of years before, Jesus walked along a beach on this same sea, stopped by a fishing boat where Peter was casting his nets, and said, “Follow me.” Peter obeyed without hesitation and followed Jesus on the journey of a lifetime. He trusted Jesus’ invitation now, as he had trusted it then. Peter intently followed Jesus’ invitation for a few steps, until

his attention returned to the waves pushing him off balance and the winds whipping at his clothing. Which is when he began to sink.

It's easy to picture Peter here as more foolhardy than faithful, like the Coyote in the old Roadrunner cartoons. The coyote would be so fixated on catching the Roadrunner that he would run right off a cliff while pursuing him, then looking down, realize he was suspended out in empty space, before plummeting to the canyon floor below. It is easy to focus on what was lacking in Peter's faith; on the fact that when he took his eyes off Jesus and focused on the wind, Peter's faith evaporated and he sank like a rock. But, it's also important to remember that he got out of the boat at all - and that when he faltered, Jesus was right there to save him.

From Noah's Ark to the disciples fishing boats, scriptural images of ships imperiled at sea have offered a symbol for the Church in its struggles. In highly liturgical churches the part of the sanctuary where the people are seated for worship is referred to as the nave. The term nave is taken from *navis*; the Latin word for ship. In fact, the logo of the World Council of Churches is a sailing ship with a cross shaped mast. You might say that "Never get out of the boat" has been a mantra that has proven to be a life preserver for the Church through the ages.

Today, I stand here preaching to an empty nave. Ever since the onset of this pandemic, everywhere you look, congregations have left the building. They are out of the boat. Not because we are abandoning ship, but because we see Jesus out there...in the middle of the roaring seas. Jesus seems to be calling us out of the boat, to be the Church in ways we have never been the Church before. But, like Peter, it can be highly disconcerting to dip our toes in the waters outside the boat. The whipping wind and feet-tangling waves can focus our attention on the risks more than the rewards. Panic inducing doubt can cause us to struggle against the one who only wants to rescue us.

What if people abandon ship during the pandemic don't come back to Church when this is over?

What if a decrease in financial support puts holes in the hull and sinks the boat?

It took faith to call out to Jesus to save him when Peter sank into the waves. When Jesus took hold of Peter, Jesus asked him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" Doubt, in the Church often sounds like lack of belief. But the Greek word for doubt used here does not necessarily mean disbelief. It can also be translated as being divided or unfocused; to be of two minds. Peter had faith in Jesus, but at the same time he feared the danger posed by the storm and doubted his ability to do what Jesus asked of him.

Isn't that sometimes the best that any of us can do? We pray for God to deliver us but are more intimidated by the power of the storm than we are sure of the voice of the one who bids us to step out in faith; or in the strength of the hand that reaches out to rescue us when we falter.

Surprisingly, the only people in Matthew's gospel that Jesus ever addresses as "you of little faith" are not people who refuse to believe in him. It is his disciples. Notice what Jesus did not say. He did not say "you of NO faith." He said, "you of little faith."

Discipleship is not dependent on perfect faith, but on even a mustard seed of faith that enables us to step towards Jesus despite our uncertainty and double mindedness. Getting out of the boat was not a test of faith for Peter to pass or fail. It was a learning opportunity; a chance to expand the faith that he *already had inside the safety of the boat* in order to trust Jesus more fully *outside of the boat*.

A popular hymn says, "Jesus calls us o'er the tumult of our life's wild, restless sea, in our joys and in our sorrows, saying 'Christian follow me.'" Jesus is our beacon when life's wild, restless seas threaten to drown us. We need to remember that Jesus is with us in the tumult of the pandemic that is rocking our boat. Sometimes he enables us to sail through the worst of times until the storm at last abates.

Other times though, being his disciples will mean we find Jesus *in the tumult*; in the world's wild restless sea of human needs and tragedies, calling us to join him there. Inviting us out of our boat. Calling us to stretch out one hand to receive his strength while we stretch out our other hand to someone else in need. It's times like these that what we may fear most is not what Jesus is pulling us out of, but what he is getting us into.

It may feel as if these days are the darkest hour of our lives, just as that Galilean storm struck in the darkest hour for the disciples. Yet, in both cases, there was (and will be) a dawn to follow the darkness. And the fastest route to that new dawn is to not allow fear to weaken faith.

For as long as the storm of this pandemic rages, and long after it abates, may we realize that Jesus is calling us to grow our faith by getting out of the boat when necessary. The waters may be rough, but Jesus says, "Take courage. It is I. Do not be afraid."

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