

Back in the Boat

How many of you have or have ever had a boat? May I see your hands, please? Okay! Good! You know that a boat is more than a hole in the water into which you pour money. Here in the lowcountry, with so many creeks and rivers nearby—not to mention the Atlantic Ocean—pleasure craft are a common sight on our waters. And boats do bring pleasure. In *The Wind in the Willows*, by British author Kenneth Grahame, the Water Rat declares to his friend the Mole, “Believe me, my young friend, there is *nothing*—absolutely nothing—half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats. Simply messing—about—in—boats.”

I know a guy who used to mess around with boats quite a bit. He has actually built several wooden boats, and was good enough to explain how it’s done. First, he says, you build the transom and put it on a board that’s a little longer than the finished boat will be. Then you make some forms that are attached to the same board, that you can bend the frame, or stringers, around. Then you attach the stringers to the bow piece. After the frame is assembled, you attach the sides to the frame. Then you put the bottom on the boat and remove the boat from the jig. Last, you paint and attach the rub rails. Sound easy, doesn’t it? He makes it sound

much simpler than it really is, but the description helps us visualize the framework of a wooden boat.

Did you know that the interiors of many churches are designed to resemble the inverted hull of a wooden boat? The seafaring terms *navy* and *navigate* come from the Latin root word for *ship* that gives us the word *nave*, the large section of a church where the congregation worships. The ceilings of a large number of churches look like the inside of an upside-down boat. And that's not coincidental, but rather, intentional. It's important to understand that, since the time of the earliest Christian communities, the church has been symbolized by the image of a boat: a vessel containing a small band of Jesus' followers, sailing off onto seas that may become turbulent.

And that's the setting for this Sunday's reading from the Gospel according to Matthew. Jesus has learned of the violent death of someone close to him: John the Baptizer. At day's end, in need of time set apart for solitude and prayer, Jesus sends his disciples in a boat across the sea. By themselves. Without him. Now the Sea of Galilee is a good-sized body of water. It measures thirteen miles in length and about eight miles in width. Those in the boat have lost sight of land when a sudden storm comes up. They can barely see the dim figure emerging from the blackness, approaching the boat. Walking on the surface of the sea.

You and I live in an era that demands logical, reasonable clarification of events such as this. Some attempt to explain supernatural

phenomena in natural, physical terms; some insist that Jesus walked on submerged rocks or stood atop a floating piece of wood. Because we hear this narrative with modern ears, it may be difficult for some of us to get past the idea of Jesus walking on water, overcoming the law of gravity. So how can we prepare to receive the rest of the story?

I invite you to view this scene through the lens of the scriptural message, to examine it from another angle. When ancient people envisioned the sea, they thought of danger. In the Hebrew Bible, in what we know as the Old Testament, the sea represents chaos: unknown depths and unseen forces, great lurking monsters and roaring tempests. Even today, when we stand on the beach and look out on the ocean, particularly in rough weather, we're awestruck at its immensity and at the intensity of its power.

In Matthew's miraculous account of twelve men in a boat, adrift in howling darkness, the sea is a metaphor for the world that Jesus' disciples inhabit in every age. We who are not *of* the world but *in* the world deal with storms as well: storms of temptation and anxiety, despair and tragedy. We're alarmed that many choose to live in disobedience to God's perfect will for human creatures to care for the earth and to live in harmony with one another. The state of the world frightens us.

Not long ago, some members of another faith tradition came knocking at the front door, unaware that they had come to a United

Methodist parsonage. The primary content of their message was that we are living in the final days. I won't go into the details of our discussion. We'll save end-times theology for another Sunday. But sometimes, it does seem as though the world is spinning out of control; that chaos surrounds us.

In the middle of a chaotic sea, miles from land, do the Twelve anticipate their world coming to an end? Since before sunset the previous evening, they have struggled against the elements, rowing into a headwind as waves threaten to overturn their boat and cast them into the water. Battered and blistered by long hours of exertion in the storm, exhaustion and fear overcome them. Have they abandoned all hope of survival at this time of the night?

The hour is very late or—depending on your perspective—very early. In Israel, occupying Roman forces divided the night into four watches of three hours each. The fourth and final watch of the night lasts from three a.m. until six a.m.—the time when our bodily rhythms are at their lowest point, the times when most of us are at our weakest and most vulnerable. And these are the darkest hours of the night.

My sisters and brothers, that's precisely when Christ comes to us: in our darkest hours, when our need is greatest, when terror grips us. That's when he says, "Have no fear. It is I." These words, "It is I," literally translated, mean, "I Am," which we know to be the name of God, the identity of God. In the Hebrew Scriptures, we recall images of

God walking on the sea, moving above the deeps. Only God who made the sea can master its chaos. Only God overpowers the turmoil of our lives. Only God brings order to our world. Jesus, the Incarnate One, speaks with the voice of God and acts with the power of God.

Yet, even as we experience this power, this presence, how do we react? In our darkest hours, as the storm swirls around us, we hear a voice speaking to us. We sense a presence. We want so desperately to believe that it's God, but we're so afraid that it's not. Torn between faith and fear, we vacillate between one and the other—for to doubt is to vacillate. We waver—isn't that our human condition?

With other followers of Jesus, Peter is in the boat, in the community of faith. Do we see a little of ourselves in the humanity of Peter? Like Peter, we put God to the test. Like Peter, we ask for a sign: "Lord, if it really is you, tell me to come to you on the water." Sounds like a statement of doubt, doesn't it? But, as Bishop Willimon points out, it's also a statement of faith. For if we listen with our hearts, we hear the underlying meaning in Peter's words: "Lord, if it is you, I know that you can call me and I, too, will be able to walk on water, because I want to be just like you." Part of following Christ is striving to imitate him in all that we do. Peter seeks to emulate Jesus, and calls him "Lord." Peter's use of that title reveals that he knows who Jesus is, reveals him as a person with faith.

But Peter wavers, just as we waver. He's not sure about the identity of this One whose voice he hears. And then, in his desire to resolve his doubt, to be in God's presence, Peter does something rash. Unable to wait for Christ to come, he gets out of the boat. He leaves the protection of the boat, the sanctuary of the community of faith. He strikes out on his own, jumps into the raging sea, into the maelstrom of the world. There, distracted by the high wind and waves, Peter takes his eyes off Jesus.

Beloved, Matthew wants us to understand that we need the community of faith. He writes his Gospel especially for the church, the church of all ages. When we decide we can get along without the church, when we abandon the boat and try to make it by ourselves, we're in trouble, in danger of being inundated by the storms of life and sinking, even as Peter begins to sink. As the churning waves threaten to overwhelm him, he cries, "Lord, save me!"

"Lord, save me!" Writing to Christians at Rome, Christians undergoing persecution, the Apostle Paul promises them—and us—that everyone who confesses that Jesus is Lord and calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How many times in your life have you cried, "Lord, save me"? Probably more than once.

As United Methodists, we understand salvation not as a one-time event, but as a process. If someone asks you *if* you are saved and *when* you were saved, an appropriate Wesleyan response would be, "I was

saved. I am being saved. And I will be saved.” By the sanctifying grace of the Spirit of Christ, salvation—being made right with God—continues as we progress along the way that leads to eternal life.

Truly, salvation comes through faith. As Jesus extends his hand to save Peter, his words on Peter’s little faith are more affirmation than reprimand. For as Jesus himself teaches, if you possess even a tiny amount of faith, “nothing will be impossible for you.”

Transformed, restored, renewed, Peter gets back in the boat with his companions. Jesus gets into the boat as well, and as soon as he does, the wind ceases. In the community of faith, Peter’s Lord and our Lord stills the water and calms the sea. Christ brings peace to the chaos of our world. If you’ve been on your own for a while, trying to make it through the storm, I invite you today to get back in the boat and experience his presence, his peace, his saving grace—to worship the Son of God in his church, and to confess him with your lips and with your life.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.