

Leaving the Boat

1 Kings 19:11-14 He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake;¹² and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.¹³ When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"¹⁴ He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

Matthew 14:22-31 Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds.²³ And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone,²⁴ but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them.²⁵ And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea.²⁶ But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear.²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."²⁸ Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."²⁹ He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.³⁰ But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!"³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

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Some of you have fed my addiction and I thank you for that. I'm referring to my addiction to books, of course. At various times folks have loaned books to me, books that spoke to them, books that they found worth telling others about. Cathy's sister, Wendy Ward, gave me a copy of *God Views* - and a few years later we studied it during Vacation Bible School. Nancy McColl recommended *The Shack* - and it was the subject of a series of evening classes. Shirley Byrnes loaned me *same kind of different as me* - and that became the topic for this year's Summer Plus program. And a few weeks ago, Janet Alexander handed me her copy of *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat*.

We just heard two texts that, among other things, deal with where and how we experience God. For Elijah, God didn't speak to him in the wind, the earthquake, or the fire, but in the sound of sheer silence. In Matthew's account of the storm on Lake Galilee, the disciples are confronted with the Lord in the midst of strong wind and waves that battered their boat. In these two passages, people encounter the divine in vastly different, one could almost say, directly opposite, ways. A lesson to be learned here is that there is no formula, no set of predictable circumstances, no seven step program that will always put you into direct communication with the Holy Spirit or other manifestation of God. However, it's significant that in both accounts (a), the people needed divine help and (b) that help came to them where they were. As the psalmist proclaimed in Psalm 23, we can depend on God to pursue us, chase after us, bringing goodness and mercy. We can count on that. We can trust that God will be with us and guide us, but we do need to pay attention. Elijah could have been distracted and missed the voice of God in the sheer silence. The disciples could have been hunkered down, their cloaks covering their heads to keep the wind-driven spray out of their eyes as they hung on for dear life. But in both stories the people in trouble were attentive enough to encounter the Divine.

Like the disciples in the boat, the church doesn't always have smooth sailing. Over and over through history, the church has been tossed about by the storms of society. In some times and places, it's been active oppression dealt out by neighbors or governments in the form of psychological or

physical abuse. Fortunately, in the land where we live, we'd be shocked and outraged if we should experience active oppression. But we face something more subtle, and perhaps more insidious and more powerful. Like the disciples in the boat that night, we face a headwind and it's hard to sail into a headwind. We're sailing into a headwind of distractions, distractions that can enthrall us to the point that they become idols. It's amazing what we pursue in our attempt to find real satisfaction and meaning in life. As I watch some of the commercials on TV, I imagine what one's epitaph might read. "Always had a really nice car" "Never missed an episode of Oprah." "He didn't look his age but he died anyway." "Fished alone and died alone." "Was devoted to the Dodgers. They moved to Los Angeles. He moved here." "She was religious in her care of bone health, colon health, and cholesterol. Lived long and lonely."

In today's fast paced and competitive world, too many mistake collecting material toys for success, mistake notoriety for admiration, mistake electronic friending for companionship, mistake sex for love, and mistake the numbing of alcohol and drugs for contentment. As long as they frantically devote themselves to these, it's easy to overlook the emptiness and meaninglessness that is carving out a huge hole in their soul. Still, why aren't people beating down the doors to gobble up the love of God and the community of disciples that can satisfy their hunger, fill the emptiness, and nourish their life?

Let's look at another part of the story on Lake Galilee and shift the focus a bit. We, the disciples, are the church, but the boat can be what confines us. The boat is familiar. It's relatively safe and comfortable. Leaving the boat involves uncertainty, risk, and fear. It's dark, wet, windy, and there are a lot of ups and downs out there on the waves. Our boat is the familiar environment that helps us feel safe, secure, and comfortable. For this congregation the boat includes things like worshipping at 11:00, but not earlier. The boat includes the minister wearing a coat and tie or a robe, but probably not a Hawaiian shirt. The boat includes piano, an organ, and a fifteen minute sermon, but isn't likely to include electric guitar or a forty minute message. This congregation's boat is Sunday morning worship, but for many, the boat of habit and comfort is less likely to include a meditative prayer service or finding Christian lessons in the monthly movie night.

But, if we think back over the past few years, we can see that we've been trying to get out of the boat on occasion. We've been getting our feet wet! We trimmed back the bushes and put an electronic sign out front. We went from hiding our light under a bush to burning it 24/7. We've established an annual chili cook-off, not for ourselves, but as an ecumenical outreach to other churches, and as a way for the community to support local food banks. We've been involved in establishing and sustaining a community garden. We go over to Cooperative Community Ministries and serve meals to hungry people. Many folks in this congregation have been getting their feet wet and walking on water for a long time. They deliver Meals on Wheels, work with Habitat for Humanity, Salvation Army, hospice, medical ministry clinics, and other organizations that minister to the least and the suffering.

When you leave the boat behind, you're going to get your feet wet. Stepping out of the boat always involves some risk, some discomfort, and some effort. Not every attempt to get out of the boat and walk on a bit of water succeeds. Sometimes we sink and get our knees wet, but if we always stay in the boat we'll die a slow death from boredom and stagnation. We know that it isn't healthy to be a couch potato. The apostle Paul told us that the church is the body of Christ, a living, breathing, laboring body of different parts working together. He made no mention that any of us should take up the position of pew potato.

We must respect our history and our roots. But respect doesn't mean that we cannot and should not look for new ways to be a faithful community in this place in this time. A tree must have roots, but without new branches and new leaves, the tree not only stops growing, it dies. A tree cannot live by roots alone. And the church cannot survive and grow if it lives in the good old days and wraps itself in the roots of its tradition and history. We need to stand on our roots, not try to live in them.

We need to think outside the box, think outside our walls, think outside our habits, our traditions, our comfort zone. I used to think that the mission field began when we left the parking lot. I

was so very wrong. The mission field begins in this very community of Christians. Are we learning and growing stronger in the wisdom of God? Are we preparing ourselves to step out of our familiar and comfortable habits? Are we chewing on the meat of faith or are we still suckling infants? The mission field doesn't only involve us, of course. When was the last time that you invited someone to come to church?

When someone is a guest here for worship, they, too, are the mission field. Will they feel like they're visiting a museum - or a place that is vibrant with life? Will they find a congregation pointed toward good things to come - or good things that used to be? Will they find hospitality and joy? Will they experience love and compassion? Will they find variety in worship - and in that variety be spoken to in a way that they can hear? I think more and more of us are getting our feet wet more and more often. But it's easy to draw back from the risky business of trying to walk on water.

Peter gets so much bad press. He faltered in his trust in Jesus and began to sink. That's the part of the story that gets so much attention. And on the night that Jesus was arrested, Peter denied even knowing Jesus three times. And that gets talked about a lot. I think we talk about Peter's sinking and Peter's denials because we don't want to think about the rest of the disciples. We don't want to talk about the followers who became non-followers in the Garden of Gethsemane. We don't want to talk about the rest of the disciples that are still sitting in the boat - the boat potatoes - because we're often like them - stuck where we are and afraid to risk getting out of the boat. We need to get out and try to walk on water more often. Will we get all of this right? No. Will everything we try work? No. But if we keep on doing what we've been doing, we'll keep on getting what we've been getting, we'll keep on being where we've been. When Peter got out of the boat, he stepped out in faith. Did things go perfectly? No. But Jesus was there, there to support, there to save Peter and pick him back up. All Peter needed - all we need - is a bit more trust. Amen.