

GENESIS 37:1-4, 12-28

PSALM 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b

ROMANS 10:5-15

MATTHEW 14:22-33

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost; Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 13, 2023; Year A

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

Getting Out of the Boat!

Sometimes it seems as if Jesus was just a bit quick to snap at his disciples, the rabbi's understandable, if not justifiable, frustration coming to the surface on occasion, as if they were getting on his last nerve. He was tough on them! Tough love! Evidently, they knew how to push his buttons, their inability to keep up with the master's teaching an obviously annoying occurrence. And who could blame him, for I have no doubt that early on in their time together as mentor and pupil, Jesus knew that he had a short shelf life, that the paranoid Roman occupiers would eventually tire of his presumed insurrection and would close in around him, bringing an end to the party. And of course, as we know, the Jesus road show lasted all of about three short years. Jesus needed to know that his mission and ministry was in capable hands, that the disciples could manage, carrying on his legacy, preaching and teaching the gospel in almost like manner. Time was running short! In today's Witness from the Gospels in Matthew it is Peter who draws the short straw and garners Jesus' compassionate rebuke, no scorn or wrath intended. This morning we read the familiar miracle story of Jesus walking on the water, or so it appeared in the wee hours of that early morning fog. There is so much more to this story than the miraculous, far deeper meanings than the obvious in words preserved on a page. As always there is metaphorical

meaning in this fascinating tale, even if we are the ones creating whatever symbolism we see. Let's look at this story once again as if for the first time, conjuring up a little memory of Marcus Borg as we go.

You remember the story! How could we forget. Jesus was walking on the water while turning it into wine. Oh wait! I think I have confused a couple of stories here. Let's start over . . . again! According to Matthew's legend, Jesus had just fed the multitudes, five thousand men plus women and children, a story found in all four Gospel narratives. Dismissing the large crowd, Jesus made the disciples get into a boat and head for the other side of the lake, this separation allowing him some down time, a time to go up on a mountain to meditate and pray, major biblical image inserted here. For some reason, Matthew tells his reader, then and now, "meanwhile, the boat, fighting a strong headwind, was being battered by the waves and was already far away from land." Frankly, this verse, at least on a first glance, from a surface reading, pun intended, seems to have nothing to do with the story, totally out of place like a fish out of water, seeming to belong with another story about a storm in which Jesus calmed the wind and waves and his disciples. Whatever! Evidently, Matthew wants us to know that the disciples were in this boat as it was tossed about through the night as if this something has something to do with the events that would happen next. And then our story gets very strange, bizarre indeed. Early in the morning, as dawn breaks the bonds of darkness, here comes Jesus walking on the water, at least so it appeared to his bewildered disciples. They immediately thought he was a ghost, and perhaps not a friendly one! Matthew tells us that they were so frightened that they screamed, a Halloween moment indeed! Yes, "Hallowthanksmas" is right around the corner! Sorry sun lovers! In what was perhaps a failed attempt to calm their fears, to alleviate their heightened anxiety, Jesus politely

says to them, **“Be encouraged! It’s me. Do not be afraid!” Easier said than done!**

Now, I do not want to be the one to burst our biblical bubbles this morning, but someone has to say it and that someone is me. When we read this story, we must remember that the Greek used in composing the Christian scriptures, the New Testament, has a sparsity of prepositions, each one laced with multiple meanings, the subtlety in this linguistic nuance forcing the reader to pick the best option. In other words, the writer could have been saying that Jesus was walking on or in or beside or under the water. Well, interpreters and translators have always accepted the idea that Jesus was walking on the water, and I am among the majority that assumes this was indeed the writer’s intent. **So, here is Jesus out for his morning stroll, the water, not the wings, beneath his feet. Well, Peter, it had to be Peter, it is always Peter, thought this looked like fun, kicks and giggles indeed, like paddle boarding perhaps, the thought of treading water looking like the cool thing to do. “Lord, if is you, order me—strange language—order me to come to you on the water.” “Come”, Jesus invites! Here comes Peter! Splish, splash, and not a bit wet behind the ears or anywhere else on his anatomy. And Matthew says that “Peter saw the strong wind!” No, you do not see wind! You feel wind! And it was blowing! Remember what Matthew told us about the weather earlier! And once again, Peter is frightened, but this time it is not an apparition that caused his sudden fear, but water, water, everywhere and going over his head. From his personal bow to stern, Peter capsized like a listing vessel, a sight to behold by the rest of the crew. “Lord, rescue me!” And somehow Jesus just happened to be close enough to his-in-over-his-head, now sinking like a rock, pun intended, disappointing disciple. A lifeline as always, the rabbi grabbed Peter and pull him to safety. And then came the scolding, an embarrassing moment that no doubt caused at least the slightest hint of shame. “You man of weak faith!” Ouch! “Why did you begin to have doubts?” No answer**

forthcoming! Rhetorical question! Even Peter knew to be quiet now! The two of them got into the boat and the wind settled down, ceasing as if on cue, calm waters magically restored. Everybody worshipped Jesus, claiming that surely, he must be God's son!" What an adventure! And everybody temporarily lived happily ever after! Yes, once upon a time, just another day, in the exciting world of Jesus! Great story, but what? So what?

Whatever we can say about the apostle Peter, the rock, the quintessential blockhead on occasion, a disciple prone to speak first and think later, at the least we can applaud his efforts. Peter does something, he takes initiative, he takes action, he is not a body at rest but a body in motion. He is proactive. If he commits a sin, it is one of commission and not one of omission. "Sin boldly," Martin Luther was once purported to have said! Peter was anything but a withering wallflower, never a neutral character among the twelve, but an outspoken leader, even if he was a leader struggling with his issues in every transparent way, just as they all were in their own way. Aren't we all? Peter is bold, courageous, a risk taker stepping out into what was the unknown as he and the others learned the way of Jesus, listening to him preach and teach, observing him at work in his laboratory among the people, an experiment in gracious love, mercy, and peace, a mission and ministry dedicated to the forgotten, the avoided or ignored. Peter and the others saw firsthand that God cares for those on the fringes, the dispossessed, disenfranchised, the down-and-out marginalized of society who live what by all intents and purposes are hopeless lives, amazingly while still maintaining whatever faith gets them through the day, every day. **Following Jesus' lead as best he could, Peter sometimes, frequently, had no filters—I resemble that remark—but he also had no confining comfort zones. He was always out of the restrictive boxes that stifle creativity, always attempting to color outside the lines, breaking barriers in the same way that the rabbi did, at least while Jesus was alive and with them. But that is another**

story! Yes, Peter was willing to fail! Yes, Peter followed the leader as best he could! Peter was known as the “Rock,” and on his good days was rock solid and on his bad days sunk like a boulder as if he had an emotional, mental, physical, or spiritual millstone around his neck. While it is true you never knew what you were going to get with this discipling box of chocolates, you at least knew he would show up at the party and you would get something. Peter had a pulse! Peter had the bravado, the gumption to get out of the boat. Call it confidence, call it conceit, call it cocky, but don’t call it timid. Humility is not always inactive and invisible! Jesus put that baby to bed for good!

I am never quite sure whether it is the Spirit at work in some of what I do in the pulpit or if it is simply a matter of convenience and timing. My guess is, if being honest, that whatever I am discussing or studying always comes to the forefront of my mind, the lens through which I see the present, real time, reality. The last two weeks in our Thursday edition of Bible study we have been looking at the seven churches of Asia Minor described by John the Revelator, yes in that crazy, quirky, oft misinterpreted, misunderstood, not-so-futuristic but real time analysis book of Revelation. It is a place in the biblical narrative I rarely if ever tread to go. These churches are a fascinating study of different, unique, identities, each one, well, except for one, blessed and cursed with their identity, the ethos that define each local congregation. The church at Ephesus had lost its first love, love being the most important ingredient in creating church as beloved faith community; the church at Smyrna receives only praise as they withstand affliction, trials and testing, ironically some of it not coming from Rome but from traditional Jews, their brothers and sisters, the schism still raw and painful; the critique of the Church at Pergamum, where a huge temple of Zeus resided, is that they had begun following the teachings of the Nicolaitans who evidently advocated eating meat offered to idols, a bugaboo that also infected the church at Corinth (I Corinthians 8:1-13). Many in this church remained loyal to the Greek

gods that permeated Hellenistic society, committing cultic acts of fornication in honor of the fertility gods, seeking to have their religious loyalties both ways; the church at Thyatira was beset by allegiances to a woman from the Hebrew Bible named Jezebel, an obviously earned nickname for this new and unimproved version, recalling another harlot who once tormented Elijah until she was struck dead, once again the fertility cults with its female prostitutes remaining popular because it was no doubt lots of fun; the church at Sardis was condemned as DRT, dead right there, in need of some serious resurrective resuscitation; the church at Philadelphia was a faithful church, basking in the love of God and the brotherly, no doubt sisterly, love of one another; finally, **the seventh and final church, the congregation at Laodicea, was described as lukewarm, as neither hot nor cold, the writer claiming that Christ would spew them out of his mouth.** There you have them in a nutshell.

Dr. Malan Nel has stated unequivocally that “building up” local churches through reformational transformation demands that a church create, nourish and nurture, name and proclaim its identity, the local ethos which gives a church its definition and sets it apart for its mission and ministry. Either a church will claim its identity, or its identity will be claimed for it. I mention the churches in Revelation as a whole, but it is the church at Laodicea that gets my attention. Folks, the day has arrived, manifest a few decades ago in fact, that churches that stand for nothing, that seek to be neutral in their ecclesiological and theological leanings, that ride the proverbial fence, you know, fence straddling, are circling the drain at an alarming rate. Standing for nothing always reaps falling for everything! Disturbingly, Paul had a tendency to do that in his evangelistic efforts, trying to become all things to all people. I really am not sure that even worked in the first century. I know it will not work now! Congregants attempting to model themselves as middling churches fear being called out, labeled, branded in any form, refusing to claim a perspective, whatever those viewpoints might be. Today, moderate churches, strangely called the

“radical middle” by one scholar, an oxymoron if ever there were one, are becoming ecclesial dinosaurs. They are quickly declining by the day, by the hour, shrinking violets whose future is at best cloudy but in reality are on a respirator, doomed to the churchly dustbin of history. Yes, it is the churches on the right and on the left that have more than a puncher’s chance, that are growing, though admittedly and unfortunately our persuasion not nearly as much so. It is the churches that dare to clearly articulate beliefs and vision, whether on the right or the left, that have potential. Yes, there are churches that are fully hospitably welcoming and inclusive, churches like ours, and there are churches that either tepidly allow certain people into their presence or forbid them outright in every way imaginable. It is what it is! But it also includes the way a church approaches the Bible, what it believes about social justice, the way it worships, the way it relates to society in general, and we could go on ad nauseum. I am proud to pastor a church that is not settling for the sidelines, that realizes that when there is a road not taken that another road will be traveled. As Yogi Berra is credited with saying, “If you come to a fork in the road, take it!” Yes, it can be fear and anxiety producing, creating stress and tension in the system. In other words, claiming an identity and rolling with the consequences makes waves. But our waves are already lapping around us because we are in the boat, jumping into the water is the only way to go.

Everyday we are on a journey together to a destination unknown, trusting by faith and our best intellectual capabilities, that we will make right decisions together. All of life is a crap shoot, no guarantees, no sure things, no certainty. We bet on our God and on ourselves! Sometimes we fly by the seat of our pants without a parachute! Peter jumped out of the boat and was scolded for it, but surely deep down inside, perhaps, just maybe, Jesus managed to hide a beaming smile on his face, proud, lauding one disciple’s decision to get out of the boat, to leave the safe confines, the harbor of that

floating inner sanctum, and take a walk on the wild side. Elsewhere we read about casting bread upon the water (Ecclesiastes 11:1)! Nothing comes back, or it comes back null and void, if we do not toss it into the drink. We do not give in order to get, but we surely get when we give! One more image. No one ever caught a fish without casting a line or a net. The metaphors are endless, going on and on and on, but you get the drift! Every day is the right time for us to play the ecclesiastical lottery and cast our earthly and spiritual resources to the wind and see what the holy and still speaking Spirit might just up and do with them. Technically, it all begins with God! Realistically, practically, it all begins with us! It is always time to get out of the boat while rocking it. Come on in, the water's fine, sinking or swimming! After all, we ain't walking, unless that is a beautiful figurative reality awaiting each and every one of us. As the old African American spiritual goes, "Wade in the water! God's gonna trouble the water!" And so should we! Every day let's keep diving into the deep! We are not a church meant for the kiddie pool, the shallow end of the pond! At the minimum we will all float together!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and calls us one and all to get out of the boat! Amen and amen.