

For Private Distribution Only

Imagine, if you will, that we are floating together in a boat, when darkness descends, the wind picks up, and suddenly we are being cast all about. We can't see where we're going. The waves are coming on board, soaking through our clothes and leaving our skin cold and clammy.

Glasses are fogged; contact lenses, hearing aids, and cell phones washed away. We've no life jackets or other flotation devices so, aside from grabbing on to an oar, the boat itself, or one another, there is nothing to hold onto. For those of us susceptible to sea sickness, nausea is setting in. For all of us, disorientation and panic are creeping in and rapidly overtaking our consciousnesses. Our fates, it seems, are sealed.

But then we look out upon the sea and catch sight of Jesus walking toward us, his white robe brilliantly reflecting the light of the moon. You might expect this to be a comforting sight, and anywhere else it probably would be. But the 1st Century sea is a chaotic, primordial place. It is both alive and populated by spirits. In Genesis God had seen fit to create domes above and below the earth to hold the chaotic waters at bay and keep safe all the living things about to be born upon the earth. And, just a few chapters later, God's angry floodwaters sprang the newly boundaried seas back across the earth, destroying all of that precious life, save Noah's family and their menagerie of animal couples. Haunting images, which lived on in the peoples' collective memory. Distant and relegated to the territory of myth for many of us today. But, nevertheless, imagery re-created for us in news footage of the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean and the 2011 Japanese earthquake and tsunami. Given all the death and destruction the sea has

wrought over the years, is it any wonder the disciples initially mistook Jesus for a ghost? It's helpful to contextualize and put on compassionate lenses when approaching this narrative. Otherwise we might just be led to believe that the disciples were wildly overreacting to their situation...

It's also significant to note that we are in the Gospel of Matthew, not Mark, meaning that the disciples are generally depicted in a favorable light, not necessarily with the frequently disparaging tone of Mark's gospel, (where, I might add, Peter doesn't venture out of the boat at all). And so I have to wonder why we have so often been led to believe that, when Peter stepped out of the boat, walked toward Jesus, then sunk, Jesus immediately chastised him for his scant faith. Not only does that reprimand feel harsh under the circumstances, but those words can be and have been expanded and translated into all kinds of dangerous theological and secular messages. As in, "If only you'd had more faith, your illness would have been cured." Or, "If only you'd thought more positively, you wouldn't have found yourself in whatever unfortunate predicament—sick, bullied, marginalized, jobless, homeless, hungry...Positive thinking attracts only positive things into your life!" Pollyannaish message that effectively blame victims and deny the many factors in life that are, quite simply, beyond our control.

If Jesus is chastising Peter, then we might also take away from this story the perception that Peter was just plain foolish and should have stayed in the boat with the rest of the disciples. Far safer in there than out upon the stormy sea! And, in fact, this comes very close to St. Augustine's interpretation in a sermon he preached on this text. The boat, Augustine believed, was a metaphor for the church. And, when adverse winds rage, we ought to stay in that boat and cry out to God for help. *That* is faith. What the heck was Peter thinking? Of course, Peter does have

a somewhat impetuous reputation throughout the gospels, rushing in and acting or speaking before fully thinking things through. Yet this is the same man who would be the rock upon which the church was founded. Human like the rest of us, yes. But mustn't he have also have had some admirable traits worth emulating?...

We automatically assume that, when Jesus said, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" he was being critical of Peter. And yet isn't it also possible that Jesus was teasing Peter, the only one of the disciples who trusted enough first to speak to the ghostly Jesus and then to step out of the boat and move toward him? We don't know what Jesus' tone of voice was, do we? What we *do know* is that, just a chapter earlier, Jesus related the following parable:

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field;³² it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches. (Matthew 13:31-32, NRSV).

And we know that, 3 chapters later, in Chapter 17, Jesus would extol faith the size of a mustard seed as transformative, capable of moving mountains. All of which makes it hard to believe that Jesus would criticize Peter for the little bit of faith, which led him into a raging sea to meet his teacher, friend, and savior.

Could the boat still symbolize the church? I tend to think so. The boat is a *fine place* to be with fellow disciples, but we must not fearfully hide out here. We can grow and practice ministry here with and for one another, but the raging seas outside our doors call out for our attention as well. And Jesus coaxes us out of the boat to see the world as it is, have compassion, and reach out our hands to help. Not to say that it will be easy. Forces and circumstances, like gravity, undertow and politics, will pull us down and leave us feeling sunk from time to time. But it's no excuse not to practice the faithful boldness of Peter and Jesus alike, bearing in mind a couple of things:

First, that Jesus came out upon the sea to calm the sea and his disciples *after* having spent time in solitary prayer upon a mountain He had fueled up and had plenty to spare and share with them. He was a non-anxious presence, also known as an “NAP.” And, second, that Peter was able to step forward and eventually become the head of the church with just a pinch of faith. A little bit goes a long way.

Perhaps it’s possible that this entire story cycle represents the life of the church and its members.

May it be so.

Amen.