

When is a boat just a boat? So often when we hear the stories of Jesus, we try to spiritualize everything. This miracle must mean this in the life of discipleship, this act of Jesus relates to my walk of discipleship and so on and so on. It's natural, we want to know what the Bible has to tell us about our lives, we want to expand on the stories so that they mean something to us, and are not merely stories from a bygone age. In fact many of Jesus parables are designed for us to do just that, they are designed for us to grapple with the stories he tells, to seek to understand what is meant by them, to discern what we might learn about living in the Kingdom of God. But sometimes, a boat is just a boat.

In our passage from the Gospel of Mark today, we hear the story of Jesus and the disciples setting out to cross the Sea of Galilee in a boat, when suddenly a storm arises and the disciples are utterly terrified, so terrified in fact that they think they are dying, and they call out to Jesus. Jesus, who had been sleeping while the boat seemingly began to sink, wakes up, and rebukes the wind and waves saying "Peace, be still!" and they listen. He then challenges the disciples about their fear and they stand in utter amazement that even the wind and sea obey him. So often we can begin to spiritualize or seek to find metaphors in the passage. Perhaps as read this passage we think about those times where we felt we were in a storm and Jesus was asleep? Or we think about the various storms that are raging in our life, and see them mirrored in the Gospel story? In response to these questions the text promises us that Jesus is with us in the storms of life, that even in his silence, he is there and by faith we can be sure that he will guide us through the tempests of life. Now this is absolutely true, in our walk of discipleship Jesus promises to be with us every step of the way, but sometimes, a boat is just a boat.

There is nothing from with this line of thinking, it's just that we can come up with all sorts of metaphors for what the boat is and ignore the simple fact that it is primarily a travelling vessel. A boat might just be a means of getting to the other side, it might just simply be a boat. Maybe the point of the boat, is simply that Jesus is trying to get the disciples and us to the other side.

The problem is that if we are left to our own choices, our own desires we'll often stay where we are. Change is a scary thing. I remember when my sisters and I learned we were leaving Ottawa to live in Paris, France for my Dad's work, we picketed the living room chanting how we didn't want to go, raising placards, even though we had been accustomed to moving every 2 to 4 years. Change is hard, and resisting change is human nature. It's safe and comfortable to remain where you are, because you know where you are even if it's not ideal, even if your prospects are limited it is known, and it is less risky than the unknown alternative. I think that we in the Church can fall into this pattern too. We can't always hear Jesus' invitation "Let us cross to the other side." It's easy to stay in our comfort zones and we wait. We wait for the right time, or for someone else to take the first step, or until we need to make the change. Maybe that's why Jesus doesn't give the disciples any time to think about the trip, they would have thought about it, debated it. I think that so often, "thinking about it" is one the best excuses for change.

Here's the rub: God doesn't seem too interested in letting us live on one side of the lake for too long. Jesus takes his disciples to the other side, and certainly getting to the other side is no easy trip. When we over spiritualize this story we ignore the fact that this boat trip was meant to get the disciples from one point to another, and that change rarely happens without challenges and obstacles. Following Jesus into the boat, taking the trip with Jesus means the disciples will experience the vicious storm and the serene calm, and finally reach the other side. And I think that is the pattern of change, turmoil, calm then reaching the destination.

Can you imagine if the disciples had asked Jesus “But what if there is a storm?” They would never have gotten in the boat, because storms were a fact of life on the Sea of Galilee. Or imagine if they had asked Jesus, “Let us know where we’re going? What will we see? What are you going to do?” If he had answered them truthfully, about what was going to happen across the lake – meeting a demon possessed man in a graveyard, and then expelling the demons into a herd of pigs – they likely wouldn’t have believed him and certainly wouldn’t have gotten in the boat.

Sometimes the boat is just a boat. And the hardest part is getting in it. We just have to get into the boat. Many of you here know this. Many of you, who are now members of Grace Church chose to get into the boat almost four years ago and accept the call of Jesus to go to the other side, to see what it might be like to be a joint worshipping congregation here in Scarborough. Grace church weathered its share of storms on the journey of amalgamation and I think like the disciples witnessing the miraculous healing of the Gerasene demoniac, we have begun to witness wonderful fruits of God’s kingdom here as Grace Church, here on the other side of the lake.

But Jesus does not stay still for long, and he does not intend for us to get comfortable or stay in our new habits and traditions. Just as he didn’t stay in the land of the Gerasenes, and continued to call his disciples forward, he continues to call us into the work of the kingdom here in south Scarborough. He calls us to more than just coming together as a congregation, he calls us forward into mission, he calls us forward out into our community into the neighbourhood where we can share the Good News of God’s kingdom in word and deed. Like with the disciples he gives us little time to debate or question what he is calling us into, he goes ahead of us beckoning us to follow. Just as there were storms in the process of amalgamation, there will be storms as we set out into the community in outreach and mission. Already last week we have been beset by a tempest with David’s announcement and the potential turmoil that that could cause. While the promise of the text is not just that Jesus is with us on the journey across the sea, the promise still remains. Notice that in the text Jesus does not say to the disciples “You go over to the other side” but rather “Let **us** go over to the other side.” Jesus was with the disciples the whole time, not matter what he was doing, sleeping peaceably or stilling the storm. Jesus will be with us through our storms, he will guide us and direct us as we transition into mission and outreach and as our leadership goes through transition.

The promise our God makes to us in the text is not only that Jesus will be with us, but that there is actually something on the other side that Jesus knows about, and that he needs to get us to. God wants to get us to the other side, he has plans for us and for his Kingdom here in South Scarborough and change is necessary. Obviously the other side will come with challenges, when we change we have to live a new reality. And that takes getting used to. When you change location so does your perception, you change.

Perhaps the act of faith is not just the trust that Jesus will still the storm. The act of faith is taking Jesus’ invitation to cross the lake to heart. The act of faith is getting into the boat. The act of faith is believing that another side is not only possible, it is essential. The act of faith is believing that God has something planned for us here at Grace Church, and following him out into mission and outreach. The act of faith is believing that in the midst of the transition and turmoil, God has a future planned for us, a future that will come with its own challenges and joy, its own successes and failures.

Sometimes the boat is just a boat. Jesus invites us in, and asks us to sail away off to the other side.
Amen.