

SERMON- Proper 7 (B)

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1 Samuel 17: (~~1a, 4-11, 19-23~~), 32-49

Psalms 9:9-20

2 Corinthians 6:1-13

Mark 4:35-41

St. Timothy's (Herndon)

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OPENING:

In 1986, two fishermen, fishing off the Sea of Galilee one-day during an epic drought in the region, found an old, decayed boat washed up on the shore.

Eventually, this boat was radiocarbon dated back to around the 1st century and thus it became known as the “Jesus Boat.”

Visually the boat is nothing to write home about: about 30 feet by 7 feet by 4 feet, but it did survive 2000 years and was probably in usage, they say, for a good century.

“Boats” have always been a symbol for the church, that’s why what you are sitting in is called the “nave” (think “navy” or “naval”), and we even have the sails to remind us, and sometimes the nave of church evens looks like an upside-down boat.

“Upside down” is maybe the important part.

Mark’s preferred spot is a boat on the water,

Whereas Matthew has Jesus teach from a mountain (Sermon on the Mount) with his authority made clear by that spatial relationship,

and Luke’s Jesus teaches from the plain so that Jesus is “on the level”,

Mark’s preferred spot is a boat on the water, as if to say it’s there, where things are often tempestuous, here is where Jesus does his most important teaching.

Now I usually think of the water as being a place of relaxation and calm, all of us headed out to beach vacations soon, or at the beach right now joining us on the Livestream, or maybe if you are already mentally at the beach, probably think that too.

But not, of course, so much in Jesus’ time, when water was both a symbol and a fierce reality that meant danger, chaos, unknown and fear.

Even Jesus’ disciples, which included experienced fishermen among their number, were terrified in our story today.

And we still do have a lot of words in our common speech that keep that fear of water going. Think:

“swimming against the tide” “being pulled under” “Drowning” “swamped” “in over my head” “All adrift” “Up the creek” “Up to our necks

And, despite all of our technological progress, we can all probably share a story from our own lives involving water which is terrifying.

JESUS:

So notice what Jesus does not say when the disciples experience the storm.

He does not say “there is nothing to be afraid of.”

He does not dismiss the source of their fear, does not deny their worry or pain.

He questions WHY they are afraid, but never says “your fear is not real.”

That would be false for him to say in that 30- by 7- by 4-foot boat, because life on the boat is indeed scary, and there are threats all around.

That’s what we teach our children: a healthy/ appropriate fear of things like water, power lines, running with scissors, strangers, addictive substances.

It would be false to say that the world offers none of those temptations or dangers—this story highlights them by placing the disciples and us in that dangerous setting.

Through faith we realize that even through such fearful things are real, they do not have the last word, or the last power over us.¹

Jesus’ words: “Don’t be afraid,” in fact, can be seen as both the first and last message of the Gospel: it’s the message to the shepherds at Jesus’ birth and the message of the angels to women at empty tomb.

That message is important because it emphasizes although there are wind and storms, God is here with us.

BOTTOM:

Here are two stories about reaching the bottom, of having no faith (almost), but then still being able to breathe and survive the storm around us, having heard Jesus’ message at the end of one’s rope.

The first comes from the classic book *The Pilgrim’s Progress*—full confession I have never read the classic 17th century portrait of the Christian journey by John Bunyan—but I have vivid memories of watching a Sunday School movie version of it as a child.

¹ Michael L. Lindvall. “Pastoral Perspective.” (Mark 4:35-41) *Feasting on the Word* (Year B, Volume 3) Louisville: John Knox Westminster, 166.

It stuck with me: throughout the story, the main character, helpfully named “Christian”, survives all these tasks and journeys and spiritual perils and misfortunes, but at the end of the tale needs to cross a tremendous river that seems impassable—with a ferocious current, and the deepest of depths.

Fortunately, along with him is his friend named Hopeful (they hit you over the head with allegory in this one), who helps him out.

While crossing the river, Christian feels that he is perishing and shouts: “I sink in deep waters, the billows go over my head; all his waves go over me.”

But then Hopeful, also crossing the river, reassures him by letting him know one essential fact. He says to Christian:

“Be of good cheer, my brother; I feel the bottom, and it is good...”²

There are real and scary things in our lives that terrify us, but the Gospel truth is that we do not need to pretend like they don’t exist and we are not alone during them.

SECOND STORY:

Second story, a little closer to home:

This one is from the Seminary that I attended and it concerns a seminary professor from a generation or two back. He was both the Dean of the Seminary and Theology Professor, tasked with teaching the tenets of the faith to the soon-to-be priests.

It was the late 1960s, a turbulent time in America, and the story goes that the Dean’s 22-year-old son took his life in their home.

In the search for answers in their grief, they discovered it might have been something related to the Vietnam War or the son’s mental illness. Regardless, the Dean would later write about how, during that time, all that he had always known, and taught, intellectually about faith was now being learned in the “depth of his heart.”

The seminary did Morning Prayer everyday and the Dean lived next door to the Chapel and had always attended the daily services as everyone was expected to do.

He continued to be present for chapel services, but said nothing –participating only

² John Bunyan, 1678, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*; http://www.samizdat.qc.ca/arts/lit/Pilgrims_Progress.pdf (part one, pg. 116)

by hearing the healing words, even if unable to utter them.

As weeks turned into months, the Dean lost weight and his health declined but still did not speak.

Finally, one day at the end of Morning Prayer, at last, the Dean stood up, climbed the steps into the pulpit and addressed his congregation. “The chapel knew sheer silence as he spoke . . .

‘I have seen the bottom and Christ is there and in Christ the bottom holds.’

He went on: “You can fall through all such notions, ideas, and concepts of God and you will fall into God. You will not fall through God into nothingness. There is a divine ground and that becomes the ground beneath your feet. You stand, having done all, you stand because you are standing on the firm ground of God.”³

CONCLUSION

That one is a tough story to tell, a week after Father’s Day, toughest to hear for those of you who have had to suffer in finding that ballast, who have to sound the depths of human sadness and grief, with or without an anchor.

I pray that you having found the *terra firma* of God’s love to stand upon in those times, even at the depths of that despair.

Our closing hymn this morning is “Eternal Father Strong to Save”—the Royal Navy Hymn, the American Navy Hymn. The immortal lines include:

*(God) Who bidd'st the mighty ocean deep
Its own appointed limits keep:
O hear us when we cry to thee
For those in peril on the sea.*⁴

I’ll close with a portion of famous prayer attributed to St. Patrick—who himself suffered a number of nautical adventures with pirates and shipwrecks and more.

Known as “St. Patrick’s Breastplate,” it made it into our hymnal (#370) the 5th verse

³ Trotter, Jesse M. 2004. *Christian Wholeness: Spiritual Direction for Today*. Cincinnati, OH: Forward Movement, 13; Leopold, Bob (April 6, 2004) “In Christ, the Bottom Holds.” *Episcopal Church Foundation- Vital Practices Blog* (Accessed 6/19/2021);

<https://www.ecfvp.org/blogs/2259/in-christ-the-bottom-holds>

⁴ Hymn 579 vs. 608

can serve as a kind of mantra, if you are ever in one of those tempestuous storms, and in need of a reminder of God's ability to show up regardless.

*Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me.
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger...⁵*

AMEN

⁵ *Hymnal 1982, #370*