

GETTING OUT OF THE BOAT
Genesis 37: 1-4, 12-28; Matthew 14: 22-33
19th Sunday in Ordinary Time • August 9, 2020
by Pat Berger

You remember a few chapters ago as we have been reading through Matthew (about chapter 4, to be exact) when Jesus had just been baptized and the devil led him out into the desert -- flung him into the desert, some translators write. Then after Jesus had been in the desert for forty days and was very hungry, the devil posed to him some interesting questions. The first two questions began with, "If you are the Son of God . . ." Tom Long, at the Presbytery's Summer Conference several years ago, made sure that we understood that the evil one was questioning Jesus' identity: IF you are the Son of God.

Now move ahead to our reading for today. The disciples had been crossing the sea in a boat, there had been a storm, and then early in the morning, they saw Jesus coming toward them, walking on the water. As it is written, at first they thought they were seeing a ghost, and then we have one of the "do not be afraid's": immediately Jesus spoke to them, and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.'" And then Peter -- dear, impetuous Peter -- said to Jesus, "Lord, if it is you . . ." Peter used the right title -- he called Jesus "Lord" -- and then questioned: if it is you. ". . . if it is you, command me to come to you, on the water." So Jesus did as Peter asked. "Come," he said. Now, I'm not a water person, and right away I can sense that someone is about to get really wet -- but Peter is better than I, and he stood up and got out of the boat. And he started walking toward Jesus, and then he began to feel the chaos of the sea around him, and started to go down. Help me, help me, he called, and Jesus did. Immediately. He reached out his hand and caught Peter. David Lose writes, "There it is, the heartbeat of the story. Yes, Peter should have kept his eyes on Jesus . . . and so should we. But when we don't, when we falter, or even fail, Jesus will be there to grab us, to catch, to support us and set us up straight again, ready to give it another go."

What ought those of us of varying amounts of faith make of this story? Most often as we read our way through our Good Book, we see the sea as a place of chaos, and we have read that it is that way in these verses. My guess is that, on many days, we could think of our own lives as a bit like that sea. We count ourselves among God's faithful people -- and life happens. After these past few months, we can all just sit and nod our heads. The lawn still needs to be mowed, the laundry has to be done, the garbage cans have to be put out. We can still accomplish most of that. And then: we can remember actually going to meetings and dentist appointments, and trying to find space on our calendars for one more thing. Since April, mostly the spaces on our calendars have remained: spaces! Still, with the adjustments that we have made because of the COVID virus, it can seem as if we see or even taste the foam of that stormy sea.

Thanks be to God for that boat. In the sea, on that night, the boat was a safe place; in the Gospel of Matthew, it most likely reminded his first readers of: the church, their faith; a safe place in an often stormy world. Those early Christians had experienced the destruction of the Temple and all of the persecution that resulted. Here, they read as we have that the disciples were in the boat; God was in their midst; they were safe. And then the disciples saw: a ghost, maybe, walking on the water. No, no, Jesus said; it is I -- which reminds us of the I AM, the words of God when Moses asked God's name. That is when Peter didn't have enough faith: when he couldn't trust that Jesus was Jesus, and asked for proof. ". . . if it is you . . ."

We get out of the boat, too. Things happen. Life becomes complicated or difficult or just plain unpleasant, and it occurs to us that perhaps we can do a better job on our own than we can with God at the helm. After all, God has everyone to love and care for, and maybe there just isn't enough divine time for my little problems right now. I'll just handle this one -- or these several ones -- all by myself. It happens in churches, too. All is well, all is well -- and then somehow things get a bit out of whack. And then usually, before they get back into whack, they get a bit more out of whack. Well, we know how to handle that, don't we? We'll just do this and manage that, and pretty soon it's ohmygoodness time. Each of us could come up with at least one story that would fit in here. We have got out of the boat, and the first few steps seem to go ok -- and then it is, "Lord, save me!" time.

And, as Don Richter wrote in Christian Century magazine, "Jesus hands over the lifeline to everyone who cries out, "Lord, save me!" and also to those who don't call his name. To paraphrase Paul, the Lord of all is generous to all and makes no distinction between Jew and Greek. With Jesus as the man in the water, even nonbelievers are hoisted to safety from the murky depths."

Which, of course, made me think of how our Joseph story fit into this. The depths of the pit in which he found himself, we are told, had no water, so weren't probably murky, but clearly he couldn't get out by himself. Joseph, according to our story, had been -- shall we say -- antagonizing his brothers. He was his father's favorite son, and neither he nor his father kept that very much of a secret. Jacob had given Joseph a long robe with long sleeves, or with many colors, depending on which translation one reads; this was not an article of clothing that begged for hard work. Joseph wore the coat, anyway, as he went to check on his brothers and their sheep -- how else would they be reminded that he was the favorite? There had been other opportunities: after one of his dreams, he told his brothers that one day they would all bow down to him. What?? And after another dream: not only would they bow down to him, but also the sun and the moon and eleven (remember that Joseph had eleven brothers) eleven stars would bow down to him. Not a bad deal to have had the dreams, but one would have thought that

the better part of valor would have had him put on his fancy coat and talk to his father about them rather than to his brothers. And then, Joseph brought bad reports to their father about his brothers and their work with the flocks. So, we are told, and are not surprised, the other brothers hated him. This time, when Joseph was sent out to check on them, they plotted to be rid of him; at first, they talked of killing him, but oldest son Reuben did his oldest-son-best and talked the others into just selling Joseph to some traveling sales people. The chaotic sea in which this family operated threatened at that point to absorb Joseph; in next week's reading we will see that Joseph has the opportunity to have the rest of the family be victims of the chaos. God's saving actions are not specifically mentioned in this story. What we know, though, is that God was involved, God's saving hand through and with this quite dysfunctional family eventually led to the twelve tribes of Israel; eventually no one was excluded.

When Gradye Parsons was elected Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of our Presbyterian Church several years ago, part of what he said at his installation was that he reminds himself daily, "Get in the boat. Go across the lake. There will be a storm. You will not die." Jesus did not tell Peter how to have more faith. Jesus doesn't tell us how to have more faith. It isn't a matter of telling; can any of us tell anyone else how to have more faith? It is about living as faithful people. It is about getting in the boat, and going across whatever the lake happens to be for a given moment, acknowledging that there will be a storm, and knowing that we will not finally die -- because we are divinely accompanied. That is how our faith grows. And that is how, as Gradye Parsons also said, we can go out in the world to be a church that would make Jesus proud. Jesus wants more than for us to keep our eyes on him. Jesus wants to reach out his hand and take hold of us, to save our lives, and he has promised to do exactly that. And how ought we to respond? I heard these words of Representative John Lewis last week, and I think they may be a piece of it: "You are a light. You are the light. Never let anyone—any person or any force—dampen, dim or diminish your light. Lean toward the whispers of your own heart, discover universal truth, follow its dictates. [...] Hold only love, only peace in your heart, knowing that the battle of good to overcome evil is already won." Get out of the boat, and go, to be the light that you are.

Let us pray.

— John Lewis, [Across That Bridge: A Vision for Change and the Future of America](#)