**Go on Ahead to the Other Side**

The Rev. David Griswold, Deacon Sermon August 13, 2023 St. Columba’s Church Matt. 14: 22-33

The Episcopal church of my childhood opened in a Rhode Island suburb at the height of the Baby Boom, and soon burst at the seams with a growing Sunday School.

At age 12 or so, I started Confirmation class. Much of our learning dealt with the church’s beliefs and practices, but one day the rector took us on a tour to explain various features of the worship space. The entryway, we learned, is called the narthex; nearby is the baptismal font; this is the pulpit; that’s the lectern; the area around the altar is called the chancel or sanctuary; and so on.

Saving the biggest feature for last, he led us to the center aisle and said “look up.” Above, we saw a row of curved wooden beams stretching the length of the room. “Imagine this ceiling upside-down,” he said, “flipped around, doesn’t it look like the hull of a ship?” As I looked, I began to get the picture of a large and sturdy sailing vessel. It felt for a moment like the building was afloat and moving across the waters.

We learned that this section where the congregation sits was called the nave, from the Latin word *navis*, or ship. It came to be a symbol of the church as a vessel carrying the faithful through the troubles of the world on our way to a safe harbor in God.

After this, we went back to Confirmation lessons like memorizing the Apostle’s Creed. But none of it made as lasting an impression on me as did that tour. And while I would soon forget some of the “churchy” names for things, I always remembered the nave. In the midst of life’s uncertainties and challenges, it has felt good to know that I’m in a vessel journeying with others.

Later I’d begin to understand church as more than a building of bricks and mortar, but as a community of people called to be church, sent out and watched over by God. Like you, I would come to learn that we travel not aboard an imposing luxury liner with private cabins, but a smaller, humbler, more vulnerable boat with an open seating plan and duties shared by all—a boat like the one Jesus’ disciples are in today.

At St. Columba’s, we can see such a vessel in the mosaic in ournarthex. Designed by parishioner Bob Erskine, it depicts Columba’s journey from Ireland to Scotland in a Celtic boat known as a currach—far smaller and flimsier than a ship, and likely closer to the type of boat used by fisher-folk in Jesus’ time.

We join the disciples as Jesus sends them out onto the Sea of Galilee. It’s the end of a long and unforgettable day that began, in earlier verses of Matthew’s gospel, with the grim news of the murder of John the Baptist as ordered by Herod. For Jesus and his friends, this is sobering evidence of the worst that human powers can do when a messenger of God challenges injustice.

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Yet later the same day comes the miracle of Jesus’ feeding of the five thousand! Now the disciples have breathtaking proof of what God’s power can do to bring hope and shared abundance despite the forces that divide and oppress God’s people.

Do we have days like this? Perhaps not with such dramatic swings but surely, we know how it feels to wake up surrounded by disturbing news that can make us question where God is. Yet such days can also offer unexpected joy and relief—surprising connections, glimpses of beauty, reminders that God’s life-giving energy and love are stirring within and around us.

After such a momentous day we might think that Jesus would give his disciples some time off. But no: he orders them to “get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side” (Matt 14: 22). And notice, he doesn’t *suggest* this—he *makes* them get into the boat—without him. Jesus senses that time for his earthly ministry is limited**.** It is urgent now to prepare his friends to be proclaimers of peace—the good news of God’s love and justice-- despite the risks.

They get into the boat and cast off, on their own for the first time. Matthew’s is the only gospel to introduce (in later verses) the word *church* to name the Jesus community. The disciples’ night-long adventure on the water is part of our church’s origin story—replicated over centuries by those like us who have been called to get into the boat and go forth as God’s people. How might it speak to us about what it means to *be church* together?

Even as the church is called to reveal the good news to all people, it can’t exist apart from the harsh realities that we and the rest of the world often awaken to and live with. We bring to the boat our individual stories shaped by love, growth and faith as well by loss, setbacks and fear. When it seems like night on a stormy sea, anxiety and a feeling of isolation can take hold. We might doubt that God or anyone is with us.

I often assume that resolving a troubling situation is up to me alone, as fear overwhelms my faith. If that’s true for you too, we’re in good company: Jesus’ friends know him and have just seen his transformative powers at work, yet now they mistake him for a ghost, which magnifies their fears.

As closely as we may think we know Jesus through prayer, worship and ministry, it can be a challenge to discern his presence when doubts and distractions seize us. I’ve found that being church together is the best way to navigate life and recognize God at work.

Peter, impatient to confirm Jesus’ identity, leaves his friends and tries to walk toward Jesus on the water. Seized by fear, he is saved when he cries out to Jesus in faith. Calm returns when Jesus joins the disciples in the boat, and they worship him as Son of God. I’m moved by Peter’s readiness to risk his safety in order to get closer to Jesus.

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But for me the gift of the story is that the other eleven disciples go on rowing and manage to keep the boat afloat, despite their fears and the hostile elements. Bold individuals can inspire us with their passionate zeal for God, but we don’t get far on this journey by trying to go it alone.

Peter’s friends endure the storm and celebrate safety together. As one scholar notes: “Jesus doesn’t place Peter back on the water, but back in the boat…to start paddling again so that everyone made it safely home…(there’s) more purpose in rowing than in water-walking.”1

I’m not a mariner and know nothing about boating. But, like you, I’ve been handed an oar and called to row as we make our way through the world as church. What are some good things to remember as we leave the shore? Three things occur to me.

First, we need to heed Jesus’ rather imprecise directions to “go on ahead to the other side.” The “other side” of wherever we are can be a place of opportunity and healing; it can also loom as daunting, even threatening. Jesus seems to want us to move beyond what is familiar and to trust that venturing into the unknown, with others, will give us a glimpse of God that we’re not expecting.

I’ve learned this among you. Many of us have faced times of transition we weren’t prepared for; nurtured new relationships across boundaries we didn’t expect to cross; or discovered blessings in the midst of losses that we thought would crush us.

Jesus’ call resonates not only in our personal stories but in our common mission. We go to the other side as we reach out within and beyond these walls to seek justice for those who have the wind against them. By offering respect, compassionate hospitality and advocacy for our neighbors, whether it’s across the city, across the street or across the table, we bring God’s beloved community closer.

Second, we need to remember that on this boat, we’re invited into the dual role of passenger and crew member. God needs both in order for the good news to be spread. Often, what we need most from church is a safe space to meet God with prayer and praise and to discover renewed hope and strength. There are also seasons when we’re aware of gifts and energies that we’re ready to contribute to the ministries that allow God’s work to flourish here.

God’s Spirit blesses us as passengers and as crew, and signals us when it might be the right time to step up or step back. And as simple as it sounds, an important gift we give one another is to extend the unconditional welcome of God, by our names when we can. The disciples in the boat know one another and do not need name buttons, but here they can help.

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Third and lastly, we need to make it our main mission to go into the world with our hearts attuned to Jesus’ heart that is brimming with love. As individuals, this might seem impossible to do all of the time. But Jesus reassures his frantic disciples as a group: “take heart, it is I, do not be afraid” (14: 27). He is ready to replenish our depleted supply, as if to say “didn’t you pack enough heart for this boat trip? It’s OK. I’ve got more than enough.”

Theologian Walter Brueggeman has written: “Ours is a time of upheaval and threat and challenge, when people are devoured with anxiety. God has called the church to be an un-anxious presence in this midst of this.”2

Let’s get into the boat, my friends, taking heart, to bring the faithful, life-giving presence of Jesus into our anxious world.

Works cited: 1. Hearlson, Adam. “Ambition Used to be a Vice”; Christian Century, May 4, 2022, p. 34

2. Brueggemann, Walter. *A Gospel of Hope* : Louisville KY Westminster John Knox Press, 2018, p. 27