**August 10, 2014 – 9th Sunday after Pentecost**

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“Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side.” The Greek word that the NRSV has translated as “made” is “*anangkadzo*” which means to force or to compel. Jesus wasn’t making a suggestion here, or even a mild request. He demanded, perhaps against some resistance, that the disciples head out to sea without him.

Now what could that resistance have been? Well, it was coming on to night, which would be one reason not to head out in a boat. I imagine it got pretty darned dark there at night, especially out on the Sea of Galilee. But perhaps the reason was that a storm was brewing and they didn’t want to be caught out in it. And it turned out they were right.

This is the second of two stories of Jesus calming the sea. It forms what’s called an “*inclusio*” with Matthew 8:23-27:

And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep.  And they went and woke him, saying, "Save us, Lord; we are perishing."  And he said to them, "Why are you afraid, O men of little faith?" Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a great calm.  And the men marveled, saying, "What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?"

There are several differences between the two stories. In the first story, Jesus is in the boat with the disciples. In fact, he had led the way and they followed. In the first one, the disciples wondered just who it was they were following, who could command the wind and sea, and in the second one, they worshiped him and acknowledged him as the Son of God.

And it was a different kind of storm, or at least the effect on the boat was different. In the first story, the waves were breaking over the boat and threatening to swamp it, and the disciples were afraid for their lives. In the second, the boat is being beat up by the wind, and not making any headway, but now the disciples don’t seem to be particularly afraid of sinking.

The Greek word for the boat being battered here is “*basanidzo*” which means to torment or torture, so battering may be an understatement. As some of you know, Michael and I have done a bit of sailing up on Lake Superior. Sailing on the Big Lake can be pretty exciting, but the only time I got really seasick was when we were experiencing something called cross seas. This is when the wind and the prevailing wave pattern are at 90 degrees to each other, creating waves in two directions. It happens fairly often in that part of Lake Superior because of the islands.

Normally there is a lot of rhythmic movement on a sailboat, but it’s usually in one predominant direction and your body can get used to it. When you’re sailing in cross seas, though, oftentimes the boat will move in all three directions – pitching, which is front to back; rolling, which is side to side; and yawing, which is skewing back and forth. It’s impossible to figure out where to stand or sit where you won’t get banged around, and the noise of the boat hitting the waves is pretty intense.

Another thing about sailing is that you don’t really get to decide where you get to go. Most modern pleasure sailboats are sloop rigged, which enables them to sail not quite, but almost directly into the wind. This gives you more options as to what direction you get to sail in, but you’re still at the mercy of the wind to a great degree. However, a first century Galilean fishing boat would probably only have one square sail, which would be at its best with the wind coming from behind them.

So these disciples got themselves stuck in a squall in the middle of the Sea of Galilee, with unfavorable wind and cross seas. It must have been an exciting trip.

But they probably weren’t scared. Many of Jesus’ disciples were fishermen, and probably experienced sailors. There probably wasn’t any type of storm on that sea that they hadn’t dealt with in their fishing careers. This makes the story in Matthew 8 especially interesting because they WERE scared there. But here, though the boat was getting thoroughly beat up by the wind, and though they were probably getting tossed around a bit inside it, they weren’t scared…YET.

One last sailing story. When Michael and I were taking sailing lessons to be certified as captains, we had this great instructor named Cap’n Mike. Cap’n Mike would have probably been described as an Old Salt, if Lake Superior were a salt water lake. He was of indeterminate age, never wore shoes, and had sailed just about everywhere in the world. So along with our lessons, we got stories.

One thing we learned was something called heaving to. Heaving to is a way of basically stopping the boat without having to anchor, so it can be used in deep water. It’s pretty technical and I’m not sure I’ll get it exactly right, so the short version is that you set the sail and the rudder against each other, which causes the wind to hold you in place.

Cap’n Mike told a story about how he and his wife were sailing a boat for someone up from the Bahamas to Cape Hatteras, and they ran into a ferocious storm. They fought it until they were exhausted and then hove to in order to rest. They did this for three days until they finally got into port. And because this is a sermon, I won’t repeat what he said when they got to the dock and everyone was yelling, “isn’t the weather just WONDERFUL!”

The point of this is that Cap’n Mike, being an experienced sailor, wasn’t afraid because he knew how to deal with weather. He was tired and beat up and mad, but not afraid. And neither were the disciples, in this case at least.

Until they saw Jesus walking on the water.

They had seen Jesus doing plenty of miracles. Heck, they had done miracles themselves, in his name. But they had never seen anything like this and it scared the socks off of them, or would have if they had been wearing socks. And I think it’s safe to say that you’ll never find a more superstitious bunch than sailors – it seems to be a universal truth.

So they yell, “Yikes! (or some other suitable sailor word) It’s a ghost, and it’s heading our way!” But Jesus is quick to calm their fears on that score. It’s then that we get to the really remarkable part of this story, not that Jesus walking on water isn’t pretty remarkable itself.

Up steps Peter, and shows why Jesus has the confidence in him in two chapters from now to call him the rock on which his Church would be built.

Not being dumb, he first checks to make sure Jesus isn’t some demon fooling them into thinking he is Jesus. I’m not sure by what criteria this judgment was made, but evidently Jesus passed because, at Jesus’ command to come to him, Peter steps out of the boat.

Peter, the experienced sailor, steps out of the boat. Onto the water.

We have no way of knowing if Peter could swim or not. Many working sailors throughout history were famous for their inability to swim, but I have no idea if that extended back to first century Palestine. I think I can extrapolate from my own experience that no seasoned sailor would voluntarily leave his boat in a storm unless it were sinking. But Peter steps out of the boat, in one of the most extraordinary leaps of faith in the entire Gospel.

He doesn’t say, “Jesus, make me able to walk on water like you can.” He just gets out and walks over to Jesus. Simple as that. Until he thinks about it too hard.

Here’s where my exposure to Warner Brothers cartoons as a child has warped my mind. I can just hear that humorous xylophone music and imagine a Wile E. Coyote moment as Peter realizes what he’s doing and loses his nerve.

Like in the first boat story in Matthew 8, Jesus calls him, “you of little faith.” This isn’t necessarily a bad thing. Remember, he’s just told a bunch of parables about how a little faith goes a long way, like the mustard seed or the leaven. But the difference here is what he says after that. In the first story, when Jesus says to the disciples, “Why are you so afraid,” the word he uses is “*deilos*,” which means cowardly or timid.

However, he certainly doesn’t accuse Peter of cowardice or timidity in the second story. He says instead, “Why did you doubt?” The word he uses here is “*distadzo*,” which does mean doubt but in the sense of wavering or hesitating. Peter had this, he had left the security of the known and was walking out into the unknown, but then he began to doubt, not Jesus, but himself. He began to doubt that his own faith was strong enough to do what he needed to do to follow Jesus. And still, and this is also what makes Peter remarkable, he calls out not to his shipmates but to Jesus to save him. His faith is shaken, but not gone.

What does it mean for us, here at Grace, to get out of our boat? How would it look, and how would it feel, to step over that gunwhale, into something unknown, frightening, and possibly dangerous? Because Jesus is calling us to do just that. To leave our comfort zones and walk on the water with him. To risk sinking and drowning, but to always know that his hand is there for us when we need it.

It will certainly mean reaching out to others in our community. Go out and make disciples of all nations, Jesus says in the Great Commission at the end of Matthew. Go out and proclaim the Gospel and the love of God to those in need.

It might also mean opening our doors in types of hospitality that we haven’t even dreamed of yet. Feeding the poor, sheltering the homeless, visiting the sick and those in prison. These aren’t just tasks for the priesthood – they are all our callings.

Peter gives us the example to follow. He hears the call of Jesus and he acts. Immediately, without thinking of the consequences to himself. He steps out in faith to answer that call. I don’t know how that will look for us. But I’m excited to find out. We have the faith, individually and collectively, and Jesus is calling us right now. We have to act!

Amen.