

Rocking the Boat

Karyn Frazier—Seattle First Baptist, August 13, 2017

First, let me personally offer you the Peace of Christ from your sisters and brothers at Fauntleroy Church, United Church of Christ. If I know the kids who sit with me for the Children’s Sermon on Sundays, they are turning north and shouting this peace to you at the top of their lungs. So if there is some kind of shift in your Spirit in some quiet moment this morning, do not be afraid; it’s just their love—with all their heart, mind and strength.

And second, I want you to know that Barbara Taylor Brown writes in her book *The Preaching Life*, that there is a chance that this “Christian vocation is above all a vocation to imagine—to see what God sees when God looks at the world....”¹ I want to invite you, sisters and brothers, to imagine with me this morning....

We step into the scripture this morning at the beginning of a storm—but it had been brewing a few verses back. If Pastor Tim has been following the lectionary, you know that Jesus had just recently been told about the death—the murder, actually—of his cousin and mentor, John—this one who had baptized him in the muddy Jordan, lifted him dripping with Holy Spirit, and set his ministry in motion.

Can you imagine how this news might have rocked Jesus for a moment? How he must have felt the loss in his gut along with the uncomfortable understanding that once again John’s life might be a prologue to his own? I wonder if for a moment Jesus lost his bearings—just a bit.

Can you imagine how he must have longed to retreat after this traumatic news, but he could see the crowd of more than 10,000 men, women, and children following him so hungry for hope—and, by this time, for food, also. But rather than retreat, he blesses 2 fish and 5 loaves—so sure of God’s abundant and unlimited love. What a defiant counterbalance to his loss!

And when all are fed, body and soul, and leftovers distributed for the long walk home—he insists—the scripture literally says--he “forced” or “compelled” his disciples to set off in a small boat. Then he dismisses the people and climbs a mountain. I have told my kids at Fauntleroy that whenever Jesus goes up the mountain, pay attention. It’s a Moses moment—actually, in Matthew, it’s a More-than-Moses moment—and something amazing is about to happen. And what I think happens first on that mountain is that Jesus gets as close to God as physically possible²—standing in that space between heaven and earth in prayer, the embrace of God calms everything, even grief over the loss of a loved one.

Meanwhile, the disciples are in the boat far out on the Sea of Galilee. A powerful wind has risen up against them, so they lurch two strokes forward, slip 3 strokes back-- battered by waves til 3 in the morning. Remember: they had not rested the day before, and now maybe they are praying, perhaps they are frantically bailing the boat, perhaps they have lost their bearings and all hope, too.

At least, that’s what I imagine.

If the mountain is a Mathew’s marker of amazement, the sea is a whole roll of bright yellow caution tape. As Carla Works, who wrote one of our commentaries this week, reminds us, the sea was the locus for evil and chaos. Imagine your small boat fishing boat rocking beyond certain boundaries, in the center of evil, chaos and darkness.³ No wonder when the disciples saw a figure walking towards them on the waves, they imagined it was a demon or ghost.

¹ Barbara Taylor Brown, *The Preaching Life* (Lanham, Cowley Publications, 1993) p 25.

²Carla Works, “ Commentary on Matthew 14:22-33,” Working Preacher—Preaching the Word (RCL), access on-line at https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2144

³ Ibid.

When I sitting with the scriptures this week, I remembered a wonderful talk I once had with my oldest daughter Sarah. At 23, she competed in open-water swims. I remember when she first took this on and described the thrill and challenge of it. She said the difficulty was less physical than mental. Eventually open water swimmers get far enough from shore to feel surrounded by the wideness of the water--so much so that they cannot orient themselves enough to be certain they are even moving. Imagine that. Sarah says you either tell yourself that each stroke matters or panic and exhaustion overcome you.

Of course, somewhere out there is a lifeboat just in case you hit the limit of your strength.

Panic and exhaustion might have overwhelmed the disciples. But then they heard Jesus himself calling over the roar of the wave: "Peace! Courage! Do not be afraid! It is I"—or quite amazingly and literally, "I AM!" he shouts, echoing the name of the Divine of the Mountain Top.

Now maybe it is just my UCC background—we are known for our skepticism--but right about here in the middle of this theophany, I thought: "Seriously?!! Do not be afraid?!!! Aren't you a little late to the party, LORD?"

Where were you hours ago? When the waves crested over the bow? We know this feeling, right? Where were you when the rent check was due? When the pink slip arrived? When the addiction consumed us? When the divorce was finalized? Where were you when the dark was dark around me? When I lost sight of you on shore and that disorienting fear of rowing in place just sapped all my strength?

This week as I have been holding the bible in one hand, I have been attending to the disorienting events unfolding in Charlottesville, Virginia. I was closely following the reports of my sister in Christ, Rev. Tracy Blackmon. On Friday night, I watched a video feed from an overflowing church that looked much like this one. All the people—Baptists, Catholics, Jewish brothers and sisters, UCC, every imaginable community of faith—all were singing "Over My Head" with all their heart, mind and strength, and I was singing, too. They were trying to encourage each other to be a presence of peace in Emancipation Park on Saturday morning when 1,000 Klansmen were expected to protest.

But just as the service ended, the pastor announced a group of 600 torch bearing alt-right, KKK members were coming their way, chanting bigotry and violence. The parishioners left by the side doors in protective groups or drove strangers back to their cars past the torches and chants. Rev. Blackmon sounded momentarily disoriented—even afraid. She said what rocked her most was that she had expected to see the usual hoods and crosses, markers of an evil of the past, but that these modern alt-right apparitions were dressed in polo shirts and Dockers! They looked like people she'd see in a board room, students on campus. So ordinary. Like us. Like our neighbors.

Later she and her friends huddled in their small car and maneuvered down the road into the night. At one point, she saw a black man walking alone up the street, and she nearly jumped out of the car: "We have to save him. He doesn't know what's coming," she said.⁴ But he turned into a building entrance on the next corner.

Where were you when I lost sight of you back at the church, Lord? Where were you when the songs changed from Over My Head to prayers of "From where comes my help?" (Psalm 121). Where were you when I got that sinking feeling we have been rowing in place against the same old evil and chaos for generations, and it is sapping our strength? Oh Lord, what do we do now?

Well...In the scriptures, the answer often depends on where you are sitting and what you are looking for:⁵

⁴ Adapted from the Rev. Tracy Blackmon's Facebook accounts and recording, "This is crazy. The KKK is out," Friday, Aug 12, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/traci.blackmon>

⁵ Grateful to the insight of Nadia Boltz Weber, "Jesus Walking on Water—A Sermon Sarcastic and Serious," Aug. 4, 2011, which can be located on-line at <http://www.nadiabolzweber.com/sermons/jesus-walking-on-the-water-a-sermon-sarcastic-and-serious-2.htm>

Apparently, if you are Peter, suddenly bold, you regain your composure and call out “Master, if it’s you... Tell me to come to you on the water!” And when Jesus says, “Come,” you jump right into the middle of the chaos—jumped at the chance to get as physically close to the embrace of God—I AM--as humanly possible. Imagine that.

If you are bare-knuckling it in the boat, maybe you shout in disbelief, “What the heck are you doing” and you lean your full weight back, as Peter, balanced on the edge of the boat, nearly tips everyone into the waves. Maybe you hang on too terrified to move. Too astonished to grab your reckless friend. (I know what that’s like.)

If you’re safe and dry on shore, and you glimpse a bit of the action from there, maybe you roll your eyes: “There he goes again. Peter: impulsive all his life. It’s pride, that’s all it is. Only God walks on water! Look at him. Who does he think he is? Why even his words echo the taunts of the devil in the wilderness and the crowds at the crucifixion: ‘If it is you, prove it!’”⁶ (There may be some truth here.)

If you are seated in the dry pews of your church on the other side of the lake when this story finally catches up with you, you might shake your head and say something similar: “He should have had more faith! We would have had we been there!” (So many of the commentators this week suggest they would have, too.)

If you are one of those people who comes to church on Sunday with your life jacket, sunscreen, and nose plugs on just in case, maybe you sit up and join in Jesus’ reproach: “O yea, of little faith. Why did you doubt?”

Oh, but if you are Christ? And Peter jumps in feet first after your invitation...

All I know is I remember my Sarah’s first steps before she ever swam a stroke in a pool or a lake...How I stooped down to her level in amazement and reached out my hand. How I laughed and called her name and applauded even when she went right down again. Oh you of little faith...a reproach? Haven’t we learned anything from scripture about what a little faith can do? The potential it has?

“Save me!” Peter shouted when he finally found the limit of his faith. “Save us!” said the others when they realized the limits of their, as well. And Jesus scooped Peter first, and then climbed aboard to calm them all.

Imagine that. Tell me that didn’t change them forever. And here’s the Good News!—while the skeptics had their eyes on Peter, Jesus walked across the water to all of them—to save all of them: the impulsive ones; the ones who were too tired to move; the ones who were weary and worn from bailing everybody else out; the ones sitting at a safe distance out of the storm. Just like us. Imagine that. And here’s the hardest thing of all to imagine: He came to bigots and haters in polo shirts, too.

At least that’s what I tell the children at Fautleroy.

And as a new day begins to dawn—they fall down on their knees, and echoing both the promises of Isaiah (Isaiah 11:2; 61:1) and even an alt-right Centurion, who will stand at the foot of the cross rocked to the core by love, and say, “Truly, you are the son of God!” Oh, sisters and brothers in Christ, please, oh please, let’s try to imagine that.

⁶ Mark G. Vitalis Hoffman, Commentary on Matthew 14:22-33,” Working Preacher—Preaching the Word (RCL), access on-line at https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=985