

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost  
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### **Is Jesus in the Boat with Us?**

If you have ever been in a boat in the midst of a storm you probably have a deep respect for the power of nature. When I found myself in that situation, I was quick to hit my knees to implore a greater power to provide a safe return. On a hot and steamy Sunday afternoon our family was returning from a weekend in a quiet cove on the Chesapeake Bay, making our way across to the other side to go home. About half way across, the clouds gathered quickly and the winds picked up and we nervously strapped in the children to prepare for a bumpy ride. What we hadn't planned for was such torrential rain and high waves that we would have to drive blindly from the helm below while the boat tossed around like a toy in a tub.

With thunder and lightning around us, the waves crashing and the boat making little progress, we zigged and zagged across the bay for the next three hours. Remembering the story when Jesus summoned calm amidst the storm with a mere extension of his hand and the command, "Peace! Be still," I'm pretty sure I invoked the name of Jesus a few times that day! In retrospect, I realize we were in over our heads, but there was no turning back.

In our gospel today we hear the familiar passage when Jesus demonstrated his authority over the tumultuous waters. Harkening back to other stories of divine dominion over chaos, such as the creation narrative or the parting of the Red Sea, witnesses of this event must have realized they were in the presence of much more than an edgy teacher. This voyage across the Sea of Galilee not only recounts God's faithfulness to a frightened people, but recalls their journey from fishermen to disciples. More transformative than Jesus' control of the elements was the power of relationship with the living God. This was the first of many storms they would encounter as followers of a new way- the kingdom of God.

At the end of a long day of teaching, preaching and healing Jesus invited his friends to get into the boat to go across to the other side. Some say it was for a time apart, to rest and regroup. But if we look across the Sea of Galilee to the other side, Jesus was drawing them from the familiar territory of Capernaum to the strange and foreign land of the Garasenes, a place of the Gentiles. There would be no rest in spreading God's kingdom beyond the Jewish nations. But on the way, Jesus would sleep, only to be roused by his panicked shipmates' shouts, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

These seasoned mariners, terrified for their lives, called out to their leader and he gave them a technicolor display of what it means to be in God's presence. Even the wind and seas obeyed him, generating more questions than reassurances. They shifted from paralyzing anxiety to a holy awe recognizing that the power of God was with them. Those who witnessed this miracle would never be the same. Jesus calmed the seas that day, but the hearts of his followers were anything but peaceful as the disciples' path unfolded.

As individuals and as a community of faith, we also have embarked upon a journey of discipleship. I imagine the voyage has not been without wind and waves. Perhaps in this time of transition fragile vessels have been tossed. You may have wondered if God is sleeping. Fear has a way of grabbing hold of us, and we forget that a power much greater than our own is steering

this boat. If only we could command our hearts saying, "Peace! Be still," we might recognize the ways great and small that Jesus is in the boat with us.

But fear is a reasonable response to a sometimes frightening world. How many of us have called out in the midst of trouble, God do you not care that I am drowning? It is hard to hold on to faith when we are in over our heads, and it may only be in retrospect that we see the hand of God working within and among us. If we only search for God to calm the waves, we may miss the small gestures of love given to us to overcome the storm of the moment. We move from fishermen to disciples as we trust in God to strengthen us.

Stories of violence and hatred such as the tragic shootings in Charleston this week remind us of how essential the kingdom work is. Crossing divides, promoting peace and being the voice of love in the face of fear is the very work Jesus calls his disciples to do. The tragedy in Charleston invites us to a renewed faith in God's charge to step into divisions and be agents of change, reconciliation and peace. We can do this because our relationship to the living God empowers us to see Jesus right here in the boat with us. The same kingdom of God that indwells Jesus has been given to us in the gift of the Holy Spirit. We have only to awaken this gift to continue God's work in the world. Theologian and author Frederick Buechner once wrote, "We have within us, each one of us, so much more power than we ever spend, such misers of miracles are we, such pinch penny guardians of grace."

My friends, I know you have been waiting for the choppy waters to settle. I am here to tell you that this discipleship adventure will always involve some stormy weather. But we can take heart that Jesus is right here in our boat, and if we have the faith to hold on to that relationship, fear will not have dominion over us. One of the beautiful things about a community of faith is that when one is in the midst of chaos and despair, and cannot even pray, we come alongside and remind each other of God's steadfast love. We stand in that gap of faith for one another. We build the kingdom of God one relationship at a time.

Let us consider how God is calling each of us to get into the boat and cross to the other side. What divisions can we bridge? Where can we be the voice of love amidst fear and anxiety? God does not promise that it will be familiar territory or a smooth sailing. But God will give us what we need not only to survive, but to flourish. Will you join in the journey?

I leave you with another thought from Frederick Buechner. *"Christ sleeps in the deepest selves of all of us, and whatever we do in whatever time we have left, wherever we go, may we in whatever way we can, call on him as the fishermen did in their boat to come awake within us and to give us courage, to give us hope, to show us, each one, our way. May God be with us especially when the winds go mad and the waves run wild, as they will for all of us before we're done, so that even in their midst we may find peace...we may find Christ."* Amen.