

Jesus in the boat

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Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

- Matthew 14:22-35

Looking out from the Lake Michigan shore on Friday evening, I could see dozens of boats out on the water. Conditions seemed perfect for beautiful, smooth sailing.

But things can quickly get dangerous out there. All of those same boats would have been at risk when a small craft advisory was issued last Monday at dawn. Waves had risen by five feet in three hours. Thirteen foot waves were forecast through Wednesday. Some of you may recall the two expert crewmembers who died in a squall during the 2011 Chicago to Mackinac Race.

Our own local frame of reference may help us better appreciate the boating and weather feature in today's gospel story. Although far smaller than Lake Michigan, the Sea of Galilee was and is big enough to suddenly turn on even experienced sailors, such as the disciples of Jesus. In today's gospel text, we see their boat '*battered by the waves*' as '*the wind was against them*.' Two time frames in the text indicate that, before Jesus came along, they had been fighting the storm all night.

Even if you or I were reading the Gospel of Matthew for the first time, we might anticipate how this story will end. Momentum has been building as Jesus heals the sick and casts out demons. And then, just before today's story, Jesus single-handedly feeds, in Matthew's words, "*about five thousand men, besides women and children.*"

And now this: a raging, life-threatening storm, and Jesus calms it by his divine authority. We may have seen it coming, but listen to the response of those who were there: "*those in the boat worshiped [Jesus], saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'*"

This is a critical moment in the theological development of the gospel of Matthew, all the more notable because this confession is not included in the versions of this same story found in Mark or John. Arguably this moment anticipates the Confession of Peter, two chapters hence. But whereas Peter's Confession is solitary, this one is shared: "*those in the boat worshiped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'*" Matthew may have wanted to emphasize something you or I may have also learned, that faith in Christ is often energized, confirmed and meaningfully multiplied by virtue of being shared. *We're all in the same boat and have been through it together. We know what Christ has done for us, all of us.*

In addition to its theological import, this story includes allegorical features that may ring true from some of our own troubled boating journeys by night. Peter could be a stand in for any of us as he first rises to the occasion with bravado, then succumbs to a panic attack, then begins to drown and shouts out, “*Lord, save me!*”

Before Peter’s drama is another, this one also shared by all. As they first see Jesus coming to them on the water, the disciples are all terrified. The Greek word translated here as ‘terrified’ is used elsewhere in the gospels to describe – guess what? – troubled waters. Matthew may be wanting us to see how the disciples’ emotions are mirroring the seastorm. We know what that’s like, when an outer storm unleashes an inner storm. The wind is against us. Tempest begets tempest. Our minds play tricks on us, as has happened to others. “*When the disciples saw [Jesus] walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, ‘It is a ghost!’ And they cried out in fear.*”

Notice, however, that this story does not begin with the storm. It begins with prayer, specifically with Jesus withdrawing alone to pray. Those of us who know Christ and who know Christ in prayer will sense the connection between this starting point in the story and the moment when Jesus encounters the terrified disciples. Listen, as he says to them, “*Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.*” The storm continues to rage around them for the moment. And yet he says, “*Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.*”

Notice as well, that the storm does not stop until Jesus steps into the boat. Matthew is recalling a boat in a storm on a lake. He may also be suggesting that our own lives will continue to be buffeted, and we undone by terror, until Jesus comes on board.

Some of us may count ourselves among those who can recall a related saving Christ moment amidst our storms. Or we know others for whom there has been a distinct *before* and *after* Jesus getting on board.

For my part, I’m remembering a bride- and groom-to-be who asked me to read this gospel at their wedding. By way of explanation, they recalled traumas that had buffeted them in prior chapters of their lives. “*We feel as if some of our own past storms have been calmed through the blessing of finding each other and through the relationship we are building. We are also learning that we need Christ in the boat with us.*”

Returning for a moment where I began: you may be able to hear, as I did, the double entendre in last week’s local small craft advisory. It read, in part: “*Inexperienced mariners ... especially those operating smaller vessels should avoid navigating in these conditions.*” How often, I wonder, do you or I feel like inexperienced mariners operating small vessels in big storms?

The advisory said, “[A]void navigating in these conditions.” But we don’t always have a choice, do we? Or maybe, in faith, we do have some choices. We can choose to keep an eye out for the One who prayed and prays and calls out to us, even as the storm rages, “*Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.*” And even when other prayers are impossible, we can muster the three words of Peter, “*Lord, save me!*” And, even or especially in the time of trial, we can regularly check our boat to make sure we are ready and willing for Jesus to come on board. Amen.