

## *Into – and out of – our boats*

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*Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." ... When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him. Luke 5:1-4,11*

*One day he got into a boat with his disciples, and he said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side of the lake.' So they put out, and while they were sailing he fell asleep. A gale swept down on the lake, and the boat was filling with water, and they were in danger. They went to him and woke him up, shouting, 'Master, Master, we are perishing!' And he woke up and rebuked the wind and the raging waves; they ceased, and there was a calm. Luke 8:22-24*

*Simon Peter said to them, 'I am going fishing.' They said to him, 'We will go with you.' They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, 'Children, you have no fish, have you?' They answered him, 'No.' He said to them, 'Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.' So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!' When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the lake. John 21:3-7*

Even if we have only a general knowledge of the Bible, we may recognize some of the boats from some of the gospel stories. These boats always function like boats, as they should. But look again. The gospel writers may have also meant for these boats to represent *us* and our lives. Nowhere is this more likely than in today's gospel story from Luke.

The boat in the story is an effective prop. Jesus has been preaching on the beach. The crowd has swelled. Like any preacher, he wants as many people as possible to hear him! So he commandeers the boat to get some distance from his audience so that more *will* hear him.

This same boat also literally represents the life of one Simon the fisherman. Think about it: this boat is where Simon spends his time. It's where he demonstrates the skills of his trade. He may have known this very boat since childhood. His livelihood depends on it.

Notice that Jesus gets into Simon's boat without asking! Jesus does that sometimes. He doesn't mainly or only want to be good theology. He wants to step right into where we live and move and have our being. Some of us have experienced this with Jesus. We thought of ourselves as good people, but please don't call me religious. And then here comes Jesus, stepping into our boat and appearing to commandeer it and even sometimes thinking he knows what we should do next.

In the case of today's gospel, Jesus asks -- no, *tells* -- Simon to "*put out a little way from the shore.*" Ostensibly this is so that his message will be heard by more people. But maybe the primary target audience of Jesus was this fisherman, suddenly isolated in his own boat! Have you ever heard *that* sermon? It's ostensibly aimed at everyone, but it's as if the preacher has been leaping through, and is now addressing, all of the most personal and important files of your life. Your boat's been rocked.

Putting out a little way from the shore could be seen as the perspective we need to sort out what's most important -- getting some distance from the hubbub 'on shore,' all of the routines, expectations and pressures there. This possible double meaning in the story is reinforced when Jesus later asks -- no, *tells* -- Simon to, "*Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.*" Some of us may be able to hear that line as an invitation to a deeper interior life, a bidding to encounter the holy One in a

way that a fisherman might describe as even more profound and wonderful than the greatest imaginable haul of fish.

What happens if we never put out from the shore, if we never put out into the deep water? I don't know how it is for you, but my own neglect of my interior life is often in tune with a quote of Rabindranath Tagore: *"I have spent many days stringing and unstringing my instrument, while the song I came to sing remains unsung."* How many of us suffer the same curse? Forever stringing and unstringing our instrument, never knowing or singing the song we came to sing. *"Put out a little way from the shore; let down your nets into the deep water."*

Notice how at the end of this story Simon leaves his boat behind. Quite a decision, given how we initially saw how the boat *was his life*. Jesus steps into his boat. Simon Peter steps out of it, moves beyond it and beyond all that he has previously been and all that he has previously known.

Another boat story, also told in Luke's gospel, features Jesus and his disciples crossing a lake to take their mission to the other side. Jesus is asleep and stays asleep when, the text says, *"A gale swept down on the lake, and the boat was filling with water, and they were in danger."* Many of us have been in this boat as well. We have been the ones who *"went to him and woke him up, shouting, 'Master, Master, we are perishing!'"* And sometimes we have recognized that it was Jesus who *"woke up and rebuked the wind and the raging waves; they ceased, and there was a calm."* (Luke 8:22-25)

A couple I was once preparing for marriage asked to have this Scripture about the storm on the lake read at their wedding. I said, *"Interesting! No one's ever asked that before ..."* They explained how stormy their lives had been. They believed that Jesus had been wakened in the boat by way of their meeting and through their growing faith and their participation in the life of the church. The *'raging waves'* had *'ceased, and there was a calm.'*

Both of these boat stories – about us – that we've examined are found, with intriguing variations, in all three synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke. The Gospel of John includes one boat story not found in the other gospels. It's a whopper. And it's saved for the very last scene in his gospel.

It takes place after the crucifixion. The disciples are crushed, disoriented and fearful. Then *"Peter said, 'I am going fishing.' [The other disciples] said to him, 'We will go with you.' They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing."* This simple story line is loaded with meaning! Peter is not merely going fishing. He is implicitly saying, *"This whole God enterprise has fallen apart. It's a disaster. I'm going back to my boat. I'm returning to what's familiar and safe."* Some of us have probably gone back to our old boats and the old life when we've felt defeated and foolish as well.

Then a stranger is standing on the shore. He's been studying them for awhile. He asks how things are going. Then, beautifully complementing today's gospel story, he asks them – no, tells them – to cast their nets down on the other side of the boat. They begin to pull in a huge haul of fish. John looks up and more carefully checks out the stranger on shore, then points and says to Peter, *"It is the Lord!"* Peter is naked in the boat. *Why do we need to know this?!* Well, every detail in John's gospel has layers of meaning. Peter's nakedness in the boat may be showing us his utter vulnerability – or maybe it exposes our own universal human vulnerability to forces over which we are powerless. In any case, Peter clothes himself, jumps into the lake and swims ashore. And as he encounters the Risen One for the first time, Peter also may have left the boat behind for the last time.

To return briefly to today's gospel: it's an inaugural story, one that helps shape the reader's impressions of Jesus and his mission and his divine nature. But as well, the story is about us. It's a prototype for conversion and following. It establishes a pattern of faith that is seen again and again in all the gospels, and then later known to believers in and followers of Jesus ever since.

One take home lesson for us may be: pay attention if it appears as if Jesus is getting into your boat. He may step aboard without asking. He may tell you to push out from shore to get a fresh view, to let down your heart into some place of greater depth. He may make a move that changes everything. You may end up leaving your boat behind and following him into some great and holy unknown.