

The ship of salvation

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Jesus said, "But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains; the one on the housetop must not go down or enter the house to take anything away; the one in the field must not turn back to get a coat. Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that it may not be in winter. For in those days there will be suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, no, and never will be. And if the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he has cut short those days. And if anyone says to you at that time, 'Look! Here is the Messiah!' or 'Look! There he is!'—do not believe it. False messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. But be alert; I have already told you everything." Mark 13:14-23

Here comes the ship of salvation!

And you ... and you ... and you ... you should *all* get on board. In fact, you *must* get on board this ship if you want to know everything that the church can be, everything that the church should be, everything that God has in mind for you and your faith, your life, your hope.

I learned about the ship of salvation from a former Suffragan Bishop of our diocese, Bill Wiedrich. At a clergy retreat in the mid-1990s, just a few weeks before his retirement, he sought to impart some thoughts and cautions about ministry and leadership in the church.

As Bishop Wiedrich saw it, clergy and lay leaders should learn to recognize when some ship of salvation seemed to be entering the harbors of our own parishes, and, he said, "Always approach them cautiously." The ship of salvation, he said, might show up as a program or a slogan or a new Book of Common Prayer, or a strategic plan.

Some of us will remember, as an example, the weekend retreat and renewal ministry known as Cursillo. That ship of salvation sailed our way and genuinely blessed many souls and revitalized many parishes in the 1970s and 80s. But that ship is now arguably dry docked and unknown to the next generation of churchgoers.

Or we may recognize the ship of salvation commandeered by well-meaning traditionalists who are certain, and who want us to be certain, about how to *hear ... read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest ... all holy Scriptures*, or the required rubrics for a perfectly elegant liturgy, or the Canons regarding participation in the Sacraments. They know, and need all to know, where God drops anchor. Get on board, and together we will go nowhere; we will treat everything new as a threat as we leaf through our dusty archives from some glorious but long-gone era.

Some might say that our Presiding Bishop's '*Way of Love*' is yet another ship of salvation. Or maybe now it's live-streamed worship. Or, in some parishes: having a children's choir, or a full-time curate. Whatever its form, the ship of salvation promises to change everything, revitalize and purify us, get the church *back on track*, and of course bring in new people, more people *like us*.

In his retirement message to fellow clergy, Bishop Wiedrich noted that the arrival of the ship of salvation often does stir up parochial vigor and activity. But sooner or later the ship weighs anchor. It sails away, often without warning in the middle of the night. As often as not, the same souls that were hurting or doubting or berating the rector before the ship arrived are still hurting and doubting and berating the rector when the ship has gone. And after the ship has sailed, the same few faithful souls will be showing up without being asked, serving on the vestry, greeting at the door before mass, or in the church kitchen washing the dishes for everyone else.

When he cautioned us about the ship of salvation, Bishop Wiedrich may have had in mind some of the final lines of today's text from the Gospel of Mark: "*... if anyone says to you ... 'Look! Here is the Messiah!' or 'Look! There he is!' – do not believe it. False messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, the elect ...*"

Arguably, the false messiahs that Jesus had in mind were or are more malevolent than anything Bishop Wiedrich described. Today's passage is part of what some scholars call the Little Apocalypse in the Gospel of Mark, comprised of dire prophecies of Jesus and guidance to his followers in the final days of his life. The Little Apocalypse is immediately and ominously followed by a verse that explains, "*It was two days before the Passover ... The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him.*" (15:1)

The Little Apocalypse of Mark is thematically connected to other scriptures, including today's lesson from Daniel, warning of catastrophic end times and of God's ensuing, righteous judgment of our souls. Apocalyptic material in the Bible endlessly fascinates some Christians and tends to breed conspiratorial interpretations. Those who do the interpreting often cast themselves in roles as God's elect, and they often vilify others who are interpreted as the damned.

I wonder, though, if the caution I've cited in today's teaching of Jesus may be more accessible and useful for us as a point of reflection about the apocalypses in our own lives: the sudden or slowly encroaching times of trial, upheaval and loss, the resulting disorientation, fear and desperation.

A fearless personal inventory with regard to our own times of trial may expose some of our own false messiahs, the falsely promising ships of salvation we have boarded or have been tempted to board: the pill and bottle, the get-rich-quick scheme, the new relationship, the new look, the medical intervention in the last episode of life that cannot, however, prevent the end.

The only ship of salvation we can board with any enduring confidence is the lifeboat on which we daily do our best to surrender the oars to God as we have done our best to understand God. This lifeboat is admittedly modest alongside the world's luxury liners and battleships, or even the occasional religious vessels that, with banners flying, may enter our parish or church-wide harbors. But you may already know that the promises promoted by and on those vessels are so often fleeting or altogether false.

On the lifeboat with Christ, he makes no promise of smooth sailing in this life. But keep your gaze on him. You may see and begin to take to heart how he anticipates and navigates life's storms and tragedies, including his own apocalypse.

If you'll allow me an aside before ending: This morning, as this message took shape, I found myself again at that storm scene on the Sea of Galilee that we heard on another Sunday this past summer. You'll recall that Jesus had fallen asleep in the boat. But why does the gospel author want us to know that he was asleep *on the stern* – that is, the place from which the boat is navigated.

"... and they woke him up and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?' He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?'" (4:38-40)

We are not alone in our apocalypse. In the boat with Christ, and with the other passengers and crew members who are fearful and struggling, we become surer and surer of our own safe passage at the end. Call it the only true ship of salvation, or call it something else; it's the place where, come what may amidst the tempests of this life, we begin to recognize and gratefully accept our spiritual birthright among those who eternally belong to, and who are eternally safe with, God. Amen.