

Epworth Chapel on the Green
June 21, 2009
Pentecost 3
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Job 38:1-11, 16-18
Psalm 107
2 Corinthians 5:14-21
Mark 4:35-41

If you spend enough time in the Scriptures, you'll discover an interesting phenomenon at work. You'll discover that God is always inviting or asking his people to *go somewhere*.

Remember Abraham? God came to him and said: "I want you to leave your life here and pack your bags and take your family and *go to the land I will show you*."

Remember Moses? God appeared to him and said, "I want you to lead my people on a special journey out of slavery and into the land of promise."

Remember Nehemiah? God said, "I want you to rebuild the walls to the city of Jerusalem, because I'm going to lead my people back home from exile."

It's an intriguing phenomenon in Scripture. God is always asking and inviting his people to *go somewhere*. God is always out ahead of us, calling us into the fullness of life that awaits us beyond the next horizon of his grace.

And so, when Jesus tells the disciples in our Gospel lesson, "let's get in the boat and cross over to the other side of the lake, it is more than just a casual reference to the Sea of Galilee.

Crossing over to the other side of the Sea of Galilee would put Jesus and the disciples in the region of ten cities known as the Decapolis, populated predominantly by Gentiles. At this point in Mark's Gospel, then, Jesus is not merely saying to the disciples, "let's go over to the other side of the lake." He's saying, "let's expand our thinking and our focus and take God's Kingdom out to the Gentiles."

Such is God's way with us. God's Realm is always out ahead of us, often beyond our ability to understand, and always calling to us to expand our ideas of what is possible. Our God is a God who is always on the move, and in his grace he is always inviting us to *go with him*.

Now this sounds exciting, almost even a little romantic. Adventuring with God. Sojourning with the Almighty.

But I need to tell you something. When you accept the invitation to go where God leads, a lot of the time some hellacious problems may come up. To use the image from our Gospel lesson, I can almost assure you that when you accept God's invitation to *go somewhere*, you will encounter some very rough seas as you travel.

As Jesus and the disciples were on the lake, the cool winds from the hills North of Galilee collided with the warm air coming in from the Mediterranean Sea,

and we all know what can happen when that happens. It's the recipe for a big-time storm, and that's exactly what happened.

The winds are fierce. In storms such as this, waves could reach as high as thirty feet. Water is coming into the boat faster than buckets can scoop it out again. The disciples are afraid for their lives. And Jesus is asleep on a cushion in the back of the boat.

Exasperated, and probably from sheer terror, the disciples rouse Jesus and say: "don't you care that we are going to drown?"

It's a fair question. From the early days of the Church, from the time of Tertullian (c. 160-225) this image of the disciples in the boat with Jesus has been seen as a metaphor for the experience of the Church and of individual believers.

New Testament scholar Rodney J. Hunter says, "this story touches us at depths beneath rationality and matter-of-factness. These are primal images of an immense and mysterious cosmos beyond comprehension and control, of human fragility and fear, and of the soul's longing for One who can command and control wind and wave, One whose power is loving and beneficent even in its numinous mystery." [Lectionary Homiletics 14:4, 26-27]

Eighteen hundred years after Tertullian, it is not hard for us to put ourselves into the boat with Jesus, and to cry out, "Lord, I've had all I can take, and I'm going under. Do you care?"

We've all asked this question. Perhaps when you sat across the desk from the doctor who said, "there's a problem."

Maybe it was that phone call that came in the middle of the night.

Maybe it was the time when one of your children broke your heart.

Perhaps it was the time when you poured your heart, soul, and life into something and saw it all crumble into tiny pieces at your feet.

It may be that you're in the midst of rough waters right now, and you're asking God this very question in the present tense of your life.

It's the universal question, because it is common to our human experience, particularly in those times when we face the storms of life and feel overwhelmed.

In the case of the disciples, Jesus speaks to the storm and stills it. Then he asks them a simple question: "Why are you so afraid? Do you still not have faith in me?"

Jesus seems a bit mystified at the disciples' lack of trust in this situation. But all the disciples can see in this moment are the huge waves crashing over their small boat. They are in crisis. This is -- as most crises are -- an opportunity. In this case, an opportunity for faith and trust. But sometimes in life, especially in a crisis, we miss the opportunity because our focus is on the crisis and not on Jesus. When we are in a crisis, our tendency is to run to God and remind him how big the

storm is. But in such moments, there is also an opportunity for us to stand our ground, and by faith to remind the storm how big our *God* is.

It would be easy, I suppose, for me to wag the finger at us this morning, to moralize to all of us of our need to be stronger and have more faith during our times of crisis. But I believe there is a more important challenge before us. The more important challenge before us is found in the response of the disciples to Jesus' question. They respond to Jesus by saying: "Who is this man?"

This is the fundamental question of Mark's Gospel, and Mark's Gospel is the unfolding drama of how persons struggle to answer it, especially the disciples. They are the ones who should be the quickest to understand who Jesus is, but ironically, are often the slowest.

But the real issue today is not how the disciples answer this question, but how you and I answer it. For when you decide to accept God's invitation to *go somewhere* and when the storms start to howl in your face, this is the question that comes front and center. *Who is Jesus?*

Much as I am tempted, I cannot answer that question for you. Each of you must answer that question for yourselves.

This much I do know. In my own life, I have discovered that while Jesus often does not exempt me from the storms, he does remain in the boat *with* me in the midst of the storms.

I have discovered that while there are times in life when I may be hurling my lunch over the boat's edge, and when Jesus' care appears more like *indifference*, I am still here and he has never let me perish.

I have discovered that when I accept God's invitation to *go somewhere*, safety is not necessarily found in the *absence* of danger, but in the *presence* of God.

And I have discovered why many early Christians drew the Cross in the shape of an anchor. For Jesus has been that, and more, to me.

As we come to the Table this morning, it is Jesus who meets us here. Open your hearts. Come with faith. Let him speak the words, "peace be still," to *you*. Watch in awe and wonder at what he is able to do. Your life may never be the same again.

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.