

Out of the Boat and into the Water

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Joanna C. Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, August 10, 2008.

It is a dark and stormy night in Galilee. On the sea, there's a fishing boat out there, being tossed by the waves like a beanbag in a juggler's hands. Seawater drenches the men; the wet wind pelts their faces. All night long, they have been bailing endless buckets of water out the sides of the boat. They are bone tired, aching with fatigue, miserable with wet and cold. And they may be a little annoyed at their friend who could feed 5,000 people with a little basket of food but who sent them out to sea without even checking the weather! And then in the early morning, while it is still dark and cold, a ghost seems to just rise up out of the deep and come toward them. A ghost! But then they hear Jesus's voice, "Don't be afraid. It's just me."

I have to confess that the closest that I have come to experiencing the terrors of the deep was when I went a few years ago on a whale-watching trip in Victoria, B.C. with two of my children. You cannot imagine a calmer scene than the harbor in Victoria, perfect Beach Boys weather, little kayak boats paddling around. Our boat was a bright orange, open rubber raft. It had a little motor and a steel bottom and benches for twelve people. As we settled in, our guide pointed out the emergency exits, as he was required by law to do. "Off the sides," he says helpfully, "just stand up and lean over." This was probably the safest little water expedition in the world – traveling a mere 20 miles to San Juan Island on a bright summer day with foot-high waves. Only I was in any danger, of losing not my life but my pride, being the only one in my group to get seasick. But I thought about those "emergency exits" and looked out at the distance between us and the nearest land, and I realized that we were not in control here.

So on the Sea of Galilee, the men are trying to keep their boat and their situation under control, when Jesus suddenly shows up, walking toward them on the sea. And in that unearthly scene of their friend walking on the water, they get a glimpse of the divine world mingled with the ordinary one that we know. Where does that man come from? Just like the mist that erases the distinction between sea and sky, the appearance of Jesus on the water erases the divide between heaven and earth. "Don't be afraid" – it's just me."

When a crisis happens, Jesus is here the whole time, of course, but like these disciples, we don't see him, we're often so busy trying to take care of everything. We've been doing just fine, thank you; everything was totally under control. Well, not *totally*, we did let a curse or two slip out – well, OK, we swore *a lot!* – but otherwise, *technically*, we were in control of the situation. And then Jesus comes and chaos breaks out. Everyone is terrified – not of the storm, nor of drowning, but of Jesus! An encounter with the divine can look a lot like chaos! Who is this Jesus who seems to rise up from the dead? What kind of world are we living in, anyway?

The other disciples huddle in the boat or keep on bailing water; they don't try to figure out what is happening. But Peter sees Jesus out there on the sea and he sees a world in which the divine touches the human, heaven breaks in on earth, God appears in flesh. It's a time to stop hoping for comfort and to try something daring.

We sometimes think of God's appearance as comforting, bringing peace. And maybe after a while God's presence does bring peace. But remember what Jesus says to those in the boat: "*Do not be afraid.*" Because when God comes to us, God may at first bring not peace but chaos to our everyday routines. I was fine with my job, happy with my life, but suddenly I feel pulled toward ministry, or parenthood, or a new job. Suddenly I feel called to start a literacy program for adults. Suddenly I need to find more meaningful work.

And what about God's call to a community? Where is God leading Christ Church Cathedral? What is the vision of God's kingdom in this parish? The answer may look more like chaos than like calling. Look at Summer in the City this year, with choir camp, Vacation Bible School, Basketball Camp. Look at the Tuesday evening suppers for the homeless and working poor. We do know something about chaos, don't we? Do you discern, perhaps, a call to minister to the neighborhood youth? Do you see God's kingdom in the excitement of children singing songs in the Undercroft? Perhaps God calls Christ Church Cathedral to be a shelter of hospitality and welcome, our table set for those who hunger and thirst for Christ in community. I see the Cathedral as a place not just of charity but of advocacy, addressing the systemic issues that keep this community from being the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God. I see signs of people advocating for affordable housing for the working poor, for health care for all people, for fair treatment of immigrants. What if we offered literacy programs, taught people how to fill out job applications, found ways to improve housing, education, jobs in order to lift people up out of poverty and bring them hope for the kingdom to happen in their lives—and in ours also?

Now when Jesus appears on the water, Peter screws up his courage so you can see him squaring his shoulders, taking a deep breath. Then with his voice quaking he makes his outrageous demand: "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." The other disciples prick up their ears. What, Peter? What about asking "Make this storm stop" or "Hurry up and get into this boat and help us bail out!"? But *no*, he says: "Let me walk on top of the water, too!" Peter knows what it means to take this leap. And Jesus says, "Yes, come."

I believe we are all like Peter, invited by Jesus to do with God what we always thought we could not do by ourselves. And in that instant when we climb out of the boat, and put our foot down onto the water, and take our first step, we follow God into God's kingdom. Is it easy? No, of course not! It's scary! It takes courage to step out of the comfort zone of our little boats, to begin a new life and a new calling.

We find ourselves changing diapers and talking baby talk when just a few years ago we had not even thought about children. We find ourselves being part of a crazy skit for children, or bringing casseroles to somebody who's sick, or preparing the altar for Sunday mornings, or taking a deep breath going out on a limb for health care reform or buying a hotel for poor people. Big and little things. But when Jesus invites us to join him in his ministry, it's all big things, it's all walking on the water. We find ourselves

redefining our whole identity and our whole place in the world. Think of how Peter had to rethink who he was, as he takes his first step on the water and wonders not whether he will sink nor swim, but whether he will stand!

We often laugh at Peter for sinking, but let's look at his courage for being out there at all and for walking on the water in faith and without fear, at least for a minute. Of course, sometimes we get scared, in this new life. We're human, and we can't always stay brave. So Peter's concentration begins to flag, and he gets distracted by the waves around him. Left to his own devices, he sinks. He waves his arms wildly; his robe billows out around him and wraps itself around his face. He cries out into the storm, and seconds or even minutes go by and he gets no answer. As he goes down for the third time, he's swallowing seaweed and sea water and he sputters, "Lord, save me!" and is raised by Christ. In the great baptismal font that is the Sea of Galilee, Peter dies and is raised by Christ.

In our baptismal rite, we promise to support the newly baptized in their life in Christ. That is a very important promise that we make, and I trust that we don't say it lightly. Because when we begin to sink, when we lose courage or lose heart trying to live our life in Christ, we are held up by the church—the church that at *our* baptism, promised to support *us* as Christ supported Peter. The church, as the Body of Christ, reaches out and holds us up, with Christ's words, "Do not be afraid." So let us to screw up our courage, leave the peace and security of our familiar boat, and go where Christ calls us. Amen.