



“Setting Sail”

a sermon by

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Our scripture lesson for the afternoon comes from Luke chapter 8:22-25. Jesus is in the midst of his ministry with the disciples and has been performing miracles of healing and telling parables of the Kingdom of God. Here begins our reading: “Now it came about on one of those days that Jesus and his disciples got into a boat, and he said to them, “Let us go over to the other side of the lake” and they launched out. But as they were sailing along He fell asleep; and a fierce gale of wind descended upon the lake, and they began to be swamped and to be in danger. And they came to Him and woke Him saying, “Master, Master, we are perishing!” And being aroused, he rebuked the wind and the surging waves and they stopped, and it became calm. And he said to them, “Where is your faith?” And they were fearful and amazed, saying to one another, “Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and the water and they obey him?” This is the Word of the Lord: Thanks be to God.

If you are like me, you feel that life is forever inextricably tied to the academic calendar- so the New Year begins sometime in mid-late August, and ends at Memorial day weekend. This new year doesn't ring in with noisemakers and funny hats, though, but with a tighter schedule, longer commute, and a return to business as usual that is perhaps anything but usual. I like this passage because I think it offers us a great metaphor for this new year and the reconvening of our Wednesday service. In a crowd of fishermen, on a common lake in a familiar boat set sail in a new direction- the unexpected puts their faith to the test, and they are left wondering what it means to set sail with a Savior in the boat. We know how the story ends- when Jesus is awakened by the disciples, he demonstrates his power over the elements and the disciples are left wondering, ‘who is this man?’ We might all be able to answer this question because we know how the gospel story ends- with a resurrected Christ. But another question just as prudent comes to mind. While the disciples betray their understandable fear, they likely had to have wondered, who is this Jesus that he heals the sick and casts our demons, and yet he sleeps through storms that threaten us? The disciples, for fear of drowning, wake Jesus and, as the scripture gives no inclination as to Jesus' tone of voice, one can presume they are rebuked. “Where is your faith?” Jesus asks.

Reading this passage one cannot help but feel a little bit sorry for the disciples- after all, they were facing the power and ferocity of a storm with the great disadvantage of human shortsightedness. They do not get to witness the storm as we as Christians do today- through the lens of the resurrection. They did not get to read ahead and see that in just 16 chapters Jesus would defeat even the power of sin and death. The disciples did not have the benefit of CNN coverage splicing footage of the storm with vignettes about Jesus' life, history of healing, or plan of salvation. And they certainly did not understand who this Jesus was who healed the sick, granted pardon to sinners in God's name, gave lengthy orations on the Kingdom of God, told them to give up all they had to follow him and yet who could sleep in a gale that seemed to threaten even him. The disciples rouse Jesus out of fear, they are rebuked for their ignorance, and they are left in wonder.

Friends, I don't have to tell you that the literal and proverbial storms of life are all around us. Every morning we open our eyes to realities we can hardly bear. Every day humanity suffers another injury, every day we face challenges we cannot see our way out

of, experience tensions of being Christians in a commodity-driven society, try to be faithful to God and ourselves when so much pushes against us. Every day we traverse seas so rough, we fear being capsized, or dashed upon rocks, or overwhelmed by rising waters. You don't have to be a mariner at sea to understand that fear which clutched the disciples during the storm- you just have to turn on the television, or talk to a friend who is hurting, or sometimes you just have to listen to what is going on inside yourself. And how many times, looking across troubled waters, do we bite our own tongues to keep from asking, "Who is Jesus anyway that he sleeps through storms?" How many times do we just want to nudge him and say, as the disciples did, "Hey Jesus, wake up...we are drowning here."

As I search for my own answers, as I sometimes bite my own tongue, I cannot help but recall an image that I have called upon time and again in my mind's eye. Today my husband and I celebrate our third wedding anniversary. We had cruised to Bermuda for our honeymoon and the attack of September 11 came just two days into our trip. After experiencing a week of sorrow, and confusion, after witnessing the reactions of others, and balancing on fear for our nation, fear for our neighbors, fear for our future, it was time to head home. Our ship left the docks earlier than scheduled- we had sailed out of New York, a picture of the twin towers stands amidst my wedding photos, but would return to Philadelphia for safety measures. Allow me to recreate the scene for you: It was 5am on a morning as beautiful and clear and quiet as any I'd ever seen. I sat outside on our balcony to watch as we pulled out of the harbor and began to make our way quietly through the channel to the ocean. City lights dimmed even as the clouds began to glow with the premonition of sunrise. As I sat alone in the quiet, I could not help but think of the chaos I was returning to. I could not help but think of all the pain that the sun was rising to greet. I could not help but wonder, what did God think of all this? What was he doing? Was he asleep? As I sat watching the land slip by, I began to notice that the channel which we traveled through was becoming increasingly narrow. It soon became evident that the buoys that marked shallow and dangerous waters were slowly drawing nearer and nearer to the side of our ship. It was about this time that I noticed that the small tugboat that had been trailing some distance behind us now began to pull closer and closer as the channel drew more and more narrow. Finally, when it became clear our ship was virtually squeezing through the land to the sea, the tugboat pulled up directly beside us, moving between us and the buoys. It was placing itself between us and the rocks, both seen and hidden under the waters, that threatened us if we got too close. It lingered close beside us and guided us through the most dangerous part of our journey. The ship's name, printed in bright white capital letters on a green hull, was "Faithful." In that moment, it struck me then that that was indeed our God. Faithful. The tugboat guided us, and as we moved out into the deep and wide open ocean, free now of the island, it slowly slipped back, then behind us. Soon it was out of sight, but not before it sounded a blast of its horn- wishing us well now that we were in safer waters and watching us move into calm seas.

Jesus was sleeping in the boat. But was he asleep in that he had closed his eyes to the fear of the disciples, to the questions that raced through their minds, to the storm that surrounded them? No. Jesus asked, "Where is your faith," because he was the one person on that boat who rested in the fact that God is faithful and in control. The disciples faced the storm with wide eyed fear, but Jesus slept in assurance. Essentially,, Jesus rebuked the disciples for being just a little too human. How many sleepless nights have we spent fearing the storm? How many boats have we scrambled about trying to bail out rising water? It is human to fear, but it is better to take rest. Hebrews 11 tells us, "now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." We do not need our human understanding. We do not need to cling to what we know for fear of what we do not- for in the midst of the storm there is Christ who will calm what troubles us, even unto death. It is Christ who is faithful, and it is Christ who will guide us into safe waters. In Christ we can rest our faith and in him we too can take rest.

On this anniversary day every year I find myself experiencing a strange tension of joy and sorrow. Of joy over the present blessing and sorrow at the memory of profound grief. In many ways, this may be analogous to what we face every day, the challenge of living and celebrating our faith and life in Christ side by side with difficult and sometimes fearful realities. So I welcome you, disciples of Christ, as you enter new waters, as you toil with the daily workings of your own ship set sail, and as you face seemingly insurmountable storms, to carve a space for yourself during the day or to join us in this space each week as we wrestle with and take rest in what it means to set sail in this world as followers of a faithful Savior. So that when the world challenges us daily with the question, "Where is your faith?" We can make our answer our prayer and respond boldly, "It is in Jesus Christ, my Lord and my God, my faith is in you." Amen.