

Community Church of Issaquah
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Adrift on the Sea of Life

Rev. Vincent Lachina

Let me begin this morning with a question, just for curiosity sake. How many of you have ever taken a cruise on one of those huge passenger ships with 9,000 of your very dearest friends?

You are very brave to do that. I must confess that I am very skeptical of being on any vessel in open waters where I cannot see land in the near distance. That's just in case I would have to leave a sinking ship and swim to shore. It would work best if I could actually see where there is solid ground and where I would land. And yes, I know it's silly, but it's why I choose a plane, train or automobile. Trust me, I've seen those videos of boats rising and falling on huge waves, the ship rocking back and forth, and frail travelers getting sea sick all over the deck. I saw the movie "Titanic," too. I saw what can happen to a ship during a cruise. That's why being in open water just doesn't have an appeal to me. And even the all-day buffets won't cause me to change my mind. Seriously.

All of us simply want there to be only smooth sailing with nothing that rocks our boat, but unfortunately, life is not like that. True, there are days when life is so calm there isn't a ripple to rock our lifeboat. And yet, there are days when we feel as if we are in the eye of a hurricane and all we want to do is to hide in a cove somewhere until things settle down and there are no more rough waters.

Today's scripture passages from the Gospel of John have a very clear message for us about how to sail our own sea of life. Did you know that this miracle of Christ is the only one other than the resurrection to be included in all four Gospels? It's a beautiful story, really. It goes like this. Jesus and some disciples have just

completed feeding the 5000 – fish and bread. You probably didn't know they ate sushi and poke back in those days, did you? And, by the way, did you realize that the number 5000 wasn't the actual total number of those present whom Jesus fed. 5000 counted only the men. Women and children were not counted in a census or estimate of the number of people present because they were considered property, not people at that time in history. So, there likely were a lot more than 5000 people sitting on that hillside listening to Jesus share his teachings.

For the disciples, this was an out-of-body experience that they could not explain and one that caused them great concern. Exactly who was this teacher they were following, and what other miracles would he be doing? It was certainly something for them to ponder deeply. Their confusion just increased after this feeding when Jesus told them to get in a boat and row to the other side of the Sea of Galilee where he would meet them later. From Jesus' perspective, however, there was a different concern. That crowd who experienced this life-changing miracle of being fed and having their hunger satisfied - though only temporarily - wanted Jesus to assume the role of their ruler, a new king as it were. But that was not his purpose in being there, nor was it something he wanted. And so, he sent them all home and then withdrew to find a place of solitude where he could think and pray while the disciples began their trip across the waters.

You and I are sometimes like those disciples. Having experienced a life event that seems almost miraculous, we then set sail on the sea of our life. Perhaps we have the feeling that Christ or God or the Holy Spirit has told us to move ahead with our life's journey feeling confident that all is well. And perhaps that journey begins with calm waters that requires little work on our part to row or even raise the sails. That is what happened with those followers of Jesus, the disciples that included Peter. "You guys get in the boat and head across the sea while I get this crowd to go home," Jesus tells them. So, they did. The disciples began to row their boat

while Jesus began to disband the crowd so that he could find a place and time for solitude. Sounds like life is good for everyone, doesn't it?

But for the disciples, and often for us, the smooth sailing doesn't last long. Problems arise. No matter what it is, it creates rough waters for us. It could be like these I am facing:

- Someone dies and grief is overwhelming. That is my story – I have had two relatives and two close friends die over the past two weeks and the loss of them is so hard for me to handle.
- Or there's bad news that a diagnosis tells us that someone has cancer, like two of my friends who have been diagnosed with stage four cancer and are in the struggle of surviving.
- Or your child has an accident or worse, tells you he must have spinal fusion surgery to correct his back issues. He's in his 40's. Too young for that.
- Or that life becomes so difficult and more of a burden than a blessing as you try to be there with someone you love who is waiting for a heart transplant. What to do; what to say?
- Or there are these little conflicts at home that create so much irritation and ill-feelings you want to yell.
- Or some other devastating news that knocks you or anyone to your knees. You know what this is like. You've been there, just like me. You have your own story.

Whatever the reason, our ship of life begins to rock, the waves become higher, and we seem to be overcome by these strong winds. We begin to fear that our ship might sink, and no matter how fast we can row or how much water we can bail out of the boat, it doesn't seem to get better. We don't know what to do, just like the disciples in this passage. How do we pray? What do we ask? Where is the comfort?

Then something interesting takes place. The scripture passage never says the disciples called out to Jesus for help. As far as they knew, he was going to the other side another way sometime later. But Jesus knew what was happening, and he began making his

way to them, walking across the water. It was the middle of the night and the disciples were afraid and were frantically trying to save themselves. No, not afraid. They were terrified. Their minds had been racing trying to understand what had happened just hours before when Jesus took a few fish and some bread and fed the entire huge crowd. Now he had sent them into the eye of a storm. The fear of the storm was consuming them. What followed only heightened their fear.

Coming across the water, walking on top of the waves was Jesus. Then a new fear arose. Was this a ghost? Was it a spirit of some sort, or an illusion? What was going on? So, they did what any human being would do – they cried out in fear. Can't you just hear them now? "Oh, God, help us. We're going to die!" Because we know the end of the story, this almost seems comical to us, but it was far from funny to those men on that boat. Jesus recognized their fear and spoke to them to calm their fears. "It's all good. It's me, Jesus. Don't be afraid." Perhaps the words of God come from the voice of a friend or a stranger or someone totally unexpected. And we are not sure if that is truly God speaking to us. We wait for the Holy Spirit to say, "It's me. Don't be afraid."

You and I often do the same thing when we have a crisis in life. If life becomes overwhelming and our problems seem insurmountable, that's the time we get serious about calling for God. Have you heard yourself say, "You've gotta help me, God"? That comes from our fear of what is happening around us and we don't know what else to do or where else to turn. And we wait for Jesus to come walking across the billowing waves to fix the problem. Waiting, waiting, waiting. In our real world, sometimes our rescue does not come the second we call out for help. Often, we are left praying, and waiting and fearful, asking ourselves, "When will Jesus get here?"

There is another very interesting part of this story. It's about Peter. Peter didn't wait until Jesus came across the water and got in the

boat. Instead, he decided to take things into his own hands. “OK,” he said, “if that’s really you, Jesus, let me come over there and walk on water, too.” And Jesus said, “Come on.” So, down from the boat Peter went and at first, focusing on Jesus, he was doing pretty well. Sadly, that didn’t last. Peter quickly began to focus only on the wind and waves, and his feet began to sink from his fear. Then in a panic, he yelled out, “Lord, save me!”

How many times have you and I done that? We thought we could fix it all by ourselves. Who needs God anyway? It’s when our own efforts fail and the storm has not subsided, that we look for other help. In our hearts, we believe that our prayers will be answered and God will come to our rescue if we just yell loudly enough. Then fear and doubt sweep over us and we feel ourselves sinking into the darkness of our problems wondering where God is and why there was no instant response. There are times when we must get to that very place before we understand that we cannot fix every bad situation by ourselves, and that realization leads us to call for divine help from God. “Lord, help me” becomes our plea of despair. Every believer has experienced this, and more than likely, many times.

When Peter did call out for help, the hand of Jesus reached out and caught him. I have a picture in my mind of Jesus rolling his eyes and shaking his head when he said to Peter, “Oh you of little faith. Why didn’t you believe I was here for you? Why didn’t you just trust yourself?” Then hand in hand, they walked back to the boat, crawled onboard, and, miracle of miracles, the winds ceased blowing and the sea became calm again. It was only when they were back on the boat and the storm had ceased that the disciples were open to believing in this Messiah and said to Jesus, “Then it is true. You are the Son of God.”

There are lessons for us to learn from this story. Lessons that are deep with meaning for those of us who are sincerely trusting in Jesus. When we are sincere in our search to truly follow Christ, not

a false attempt at some sort of cosmetic Christianity that says I'll just change my behavior, our faith can and will overcome our fears. None of us will ever be exempt from difficult times and struggles. That has never been a promise of the Scriptures, nor is there security in that often misunderstood verse that says God will not give us more than we can handle. It is when we exercise that deeper faith even in the worst of times that God can help us put aside our fears. That is when we can feel the hand of Jesus reach out to us and bring us through the stormy seas of life, to walk with him, even atop the stormy waters.

I would not be honest if I didn't confess that there have been times in my own life when, like Peter, I have taken my eyes off Christ and looked down at the swirling flood below me. It is in those times that pure fear causes me to sense that I will fail, that things will never get better, and that there is no hope for smoother waters. It is easy for me at those times to convince myself that my ship is doomed to sink and I'm going down with it, and I have no life preserver. In that moment, I should remember that for Peter, the calm seas came only when he reached out his hand and took the hand of Jesus. When we believe, meaning when we have **real** faith, that Jesus can help us and we reach out for that help, that's when our fears begin to recede, and we begin to believe that there is a safe place and things will change for the better.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that if we yell, "Lord, save me!" all of our problems will be solved immediately. That's not the point. The point is that we have a life lesson here that tells us that until we do exercise our **real** faith in the Lord, all the efforts we expend are simply us trying to save ourselves. And I do mean a **real** faith in Jesus that doesn't just govern how we behave, but how we build our lives on seeking and following the Jesus who does walk on water, who takes our hand in a crisis, who leads us to shore, and who will calm our fears and help us experience that inner peace in our lives. Suffering does indeed most often come before the blessings we seek. But the blessings do come, I can promise you

that. I doubt I'll ever be physically able to walk on water, but one thing I know for certain, I'm going to have my hand outstretched and waiting for the hand of God to take me on to a clam place each time the chaos of my own life overwhelms me like the deep waters of fear.

My prayer is that you will trust your own faith to know that Jesus will take you onboard his boat and bring you to calmer waters after the storm. Believe, and trust, then reach out your hand and let the Lord show you how to walk on spiritual waters. That's when you really experience the real Jesus, hand-in-hand. Amen.