

“And He Got into the Boat”

“And he got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased” (Mark 6:51).

Today’s Gospel reading comes on the heels of Jesus feeding a massive crowd with five loaves of bread and two fish. In the verses just before today’s text, we are told that “they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and fish. And those who ate the loaves were five thousand men” (Mark 6:42-44). And no sooner had the disciples collected these extraordinary leftovers than Jesus was ordering them into the boat.

Before we go further, it’s important to dig a little deeper into this verse. The first verse of our text simply says that Jesus made them get into the boat and, while that’s a fine translation, it fails to convey the force of the original verb. You see, the Greek verb used here communicates an all-out order from Jesus, commanding them to get into the boat. The definition of this Greek verb is “to necessitate, compel, drive, or constrain by force or threats.” I’m sure that Jesus didn’t need to threaten the disciples, but I can’t imagine that these exhausted men were all that interested in boarding the boat, and it took a firm word from Jesus before they would finally head out onto the lake.

What we learn about the weather later in the reading helps explain their reluctance. Most of these men were experienced fishermen. They made their living on this body of water, boats were not intimidating or unfamiliar to them, and yet, as they looked out at the Sea of Galilee, perhaps they knew that a storm was brewing. Night was also falling, and after a day that included the news of John the Baptist’s beheading, and the challenges of managing the enormous crowds who pressed in to hear and be healed by Jesus, the last thing the disciples wanted to do was battle a rough sea at night.

In John’s Gospel, we find some additional information that helps bring understanding to this bizarre scene on the beach. John tells us that following the feeding of the 5,000, the crowds began to rally. People began to talk of Jesus as the Messiah, and, in a sense they were right. But these people did not understand Jesus’ ministry and, John writes, “they were about to come and take him by force to make him king (John 6:15). This wasn’t the first or last time the crowds would misunderstand Jesus’ mission, and yet as they stood there, basking in the glow of the miraculous feast, they were planning to usher in the revolution, to crown Jesus as their provider and protector, and make Him their king. And Jesus would have nothing to do with this twisted misunderstanding of the reason for His coming. Knowing the disciples would have only made dealing with the mob more difficult, or perhaps knowing that the disciples also held these same flawed ideas about Jesus, He herded them into the boat and shoved them out into the lake.

Whatever the reason for Jesus’ action in this verse, we can be sure that the disciples weren’t happy about it. Yet, as much as they may have protested, they were now on their way into rough water, and they were alone in the boat. Can you imagine how frustrated the disciples must have been? Instead of being able to sit at Jesus’ feet and process all that they had seen and heard during this amazing day, they were pushed away and sent on ahead without Jesus. Rather than the rest they desperately needed, they were now left to battle a storm in which they knew they had no business sailing. Instead of enjoying a quiet night together, reflecting on their small part in Jesus’ miracle, they were now totally alone and battling to stay afloat.

And how often is this the way we feel about our lives? We plan out our days, we line up our schedules, we research, we save, we do all the right things, we even pray about the direction we hope to see our lives go, but then, we suddenly find ourselves in a situation we would never have chosen, and, like the disciples, we feel overwhelmed. The plain, hard truth is that there are times in life when God makes us get into the boat; when God “necessitates, compels, drives, or constrains” us to move out into the water. An unexpected diagnosis or a sudden job change; a divorce or a death; in times like these, we can relate to the disillusioned disciples, frustrated and alone, battling simply to stay afloat. And it is in these times of chaos and confusion that we need to hear the message of today’s text.

Mark writes, “And when evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. And he saw that they were making headway painfully, for the wind was against them” (Mark 6:47-48). Did you hear that? “*He saw the wind was against them.*” These words are more than just a narrative description of an isolated event in Mark’s Gospel. These are words of promise, and these are words of assurance that no matter how deep the water or how strong the storm we are never outside of God’s view. The God who numbers the hairs of our head and knows if even one sparrow falls from the sky, that same God has His eyes on you, and He will never leave or forsake you. Jesus drove His disciples into the boat and yet, He was watching them – carefully and compassionately – even as they struggled against the wind! And Jesus has His eyes on you as well.

Mark continues, “And about the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea...but when they saw him walking on the sea they thought it was a ghost, and cried out, for they all saw him and were terrified” (Mark 6:48-50). If you think about it, this is a curious reaction. Here is Jesus, who just earlier had fed the multitudes. He had also healed the sick, driven out demons, taught the teachers, and even raised a girl from the dead. Now, He had come to them, walking on the lake, and they were terrified!

And this is what sin does. It keeps us from recognizing who God is and remembering what He has done. Instead of drawing on past experiences in which God has worked in our lives, we dwell on the problems of the moment. Instead of looking to the means of grace where God has promised to be present, we turn to the innovations and whims of a sin-sick world. Instead of finding comfort and peace in the encouragement of a Christian brother or sister, we turn in on ourselves and become isolated from the very people God has put into our lives for our good. And yet He still comes! Through the storm and over the deep and through the darkness He speaks, “‘Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.’ And he got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased” (Mark 6:52).

We can all relate to the terrified disciples. But the Words that God shares with you today are Words of promise that no matter what situation you may find yourself in, no matter how hard you’ve fought or how far you have fled, you can take heart because the God who puts rainbows in the sky and controls the wind and waves...that same God has given His Son for you. In Christ, He has called you by name. In Christ, He has redeemed you, and in Christ, He is in the boat with you and through Him, you will make it safely to the other side. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today, and all God’s people say, “Amen”

Pastor Thomas A. Eggold