

It's rare that I get to stand in the pulpit, so this is kind of fun. As a child, I loved good stories. One of my favorite stories in all of scripture is the story from our gospel reading today, the story of Jesus walking on the water in the midst of a furious storm. I think I love this particular story because it seemed to me to give us a glimpse of a superhero Jesus who after a little bit of prayer on the mountain lets drop his everyday disguise as a carpenter turned teacher to something humanly impossible. In my mind's eye, when I read this passage, his rough robe became more of a billowing cape in this moment as he, like some comic book Superman, kind of glides out through the storm to save his sidekick disciples who are stuck in their sinking boat.

Maybe over the years you've read this story much the same way or heard it read a little bit like a Marvel comic book or DC Universe adventure from the safety of a chair by the fireplace or by the pool, for those of you in San Diego, or from a padded pew here at church. That's how I used to read this story, but given the ongoing uncertainty in our world, it's not how I read this story anymore. Now, far too often, I'm not just reading about a boat in a storm. Instead, it feels like I'm in the boat in the storm, and if the truth is to be told, I'm not happy to be in that boat. Far too often, the waves are breaking over the bow. There's no land in sight. It's dark, and the wind doesn't seem to be letting up.

Maybe I'm not the only one that feels like they're in the boat today. Maybe you're not just reading about these waves either but feeling them crash into you one after the other, and for you, it feels like the wind is anything but done. This could be because recently you had a change at your job. You lost your job. Your hours were cut, and the bills keep rolling in, or maybe for you, you're in the boat for medical reasons.

For you, the storm started this past week in the doctor's office, and the waves coming over the bow are called side effects and survival percentages for you or for someone that you love, or maybe your storm centers around something at home, a marriage that you're afraid is largely a lie, conflict with your kids or siblings or parents. The waves for you could also be ones of depression or anxiety or a death that punched a gaping hole in the side of the boat, and the water seems to be rushing in. By this time, Matthew writes, "The boat battered by the waves was far from the land for the wind was against them."

My first question for you this morning is where are you? Are you reading about this boat in a storm, or is there a chance that you are in the boat? I can tell you that the story reads very differently if we're in the boat rather than

just watching it unfold on the page. It occurs to me that the way that we know that we are actually in the boat is that we, just like the disciples, we don't recognize Jesus when he appears.

Early in the morning, Jesus came walking to them on the sea, but when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified saying, "It's a ghost," and they cried out in fear. My first reaction to so many of our gospel stories and the disciples in these gospel stories is to smirk at their anxieties, at their ignorance, and repeated examples of apparent cluelessness. "What blockheads," I have often thought, but that reaction is what I would call my padded pew reaction. It's entirely different when I find myself in the boat in the storm too.

When I find myself in the boat in the storm, I'm hollering for all that I'm worth, just as terrified, just as clueless, and just as likely to assume that Jesus, when Jesus does arrive, is a threat to me rather than salvation. But then he speaks. Immediately, Matthew writes, "Jesus speaks into their fear and says simply, 'Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid.'"

Did they believe him? We don't know from the text. All we know is that Peter, brash "shoot first, think later" Peter yells back, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water," and Jesus says just one word, "Come," so Peter does. In the midst of the storm in the middle of the night and all by himself, Peter goes over the side of that boat and starts to walk on the water to Jesus.

Matthew doesn't tell us if he gets five steps from the boat or 10 or even 15 before what he is doing sinks in, pun intended, and he goes down crying out in fear. "Lord save me." For the third time in this short gospel story, Matthew uses the word "immediately." Peter cries out, and immediately Jesus reaches out his hand and pulls him up. As Jesus does this, he says, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

For a moment I would invite you to all pretend with me that you are Greek language scholars and that as Greek language scholars, we notice something in the Greek that's not as clear in English here. Jesus doesn't just suggest that Peter is a little shy in the faith department. He actually calls Peter in this passage a little faith. "You little faith," he says, "Why did you doubt?"

I think it matters a great deal to us how Jesus says this. Is he angry at Peter? "You little faith. Why did you doubt?" Is he scornful? "You little faith. Why did you doubt?" or is what Peter hears in Jesus' voice, as Jesus pulls him up, love, "You little faith. Why did you doubt?" My money, all of my money, actually, is on this last one, on love, for our

God does not call us to get out of the boat simply to be an object lesson for others. Our God doesn't call us to get out of the boat to have a cosmic laugh at our expense when we sink. Our God doesn't call us to get out of the boat to prove our frailty or as a test that he knows we will flunk because we all are, even the very best of us, little faiths.

No, Jesus calls us to leave the imagined safety of our boat for nothing less than the fierce joy of walking with him on the water where the wind and the waves do nothing more than reveal who he truly is and who we can become as he takes our hand. How do we get out of the boat? Well, that's simple. We just do it. The real question we need to ask is why would we risk it? Here's the reason it's worth all of the risk. Out of the boat is where we meet Jesus. Jesus calls us to leave the imagined safety of our boat in order to meet him where he is out on the water, out in the world, not in the boat. "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water," and Jesus says, "Come."

Almost every commentator on this passage of scripture going back to the earliest church fathers and mothers read this passage not just as a miracle story, but also as a metaphor for Christ's call to us in the church and the boat in this metaphor where the boat is the church. It's important in verse 22 at the beginning of the passage to note that Jesus tells the disciples to get into the boat in the first place. Read metaphorically the church. But note that when he does this, he makes no promise of smooth sailing.

Storms come. They always have. They always will. It's in the midst of this storm that Jesus says to Peter, "Come," and I believe Jesus is saying the same to us as well. "Come." Now, let me tell you the reason that this particular story has become my story in a new way in the last few years. Ten years ago, I was one of the pastors of First Presbyterian Church in Spokane, Washington, but I left my call there to launch a nonprofit that has no precedent anywhere in the country. This nonprofit, as Rebecca mentioned, is the reason I'm here today.

It's called Big Table. It comes out of my years of moonlighting as a restaurant critic for multiple papers and magazines in the Northwest, and not that I had any intention or anything in my head like Big Table when I started writing. The editors of the magazine and then the paper just said they liked my writing and asked if I would write about food for free. They would pay for it. Since I absolutely love food, and I love to write almost as much, it was kind of a no-brainer.

But God had more in mind for me than I did than just a few free meals. As I started to write, as I started to spend time with chefs and owners, people in the industry, God

opened my eyes to what is literally the largest industry in our nation, the restaurant hospitality industry. Then God showed me the almost complete disconnect between the church and this largest industry in our country. A little bit of it, think about where they are this morning. They're probably not here. They're getting ready for the brunch rush.

Then the third thing that God showed me was that this industry has more need in it than any industry that I'd ever come across as a pastor that's hidden behind the smiles of those who serve us, who cook for us, who make our beds when we're in a hotel. Then if that wasn't enough, in the middle of the night in 2006, God woke me up and literally said, "Kevin, I need a pastor for the restaurant industry. Are you interested?" That's the most strange conversation I've ever had. Pitch black room, clearly someone talking to me. I think God said in that moment, "Oh, and by the way, they aren't planning to come to church anytime soon. If you accept, you're going to have to give up your title and your really cool study with stained glass windows and start working in kitchens and hanging out in bars."

When I look back on that middle-of-the-night conversation, I now know that what God was asking of me was what he asked of Peter, to get out of the boat. It took me a lot longer than it took Peter, two years to be exact, but on December 28th, 2008 at 9:15 in the morning, my friends at First Presbyterian Church in Spokane helped me officially go over the side of the boat.

Humanly speaking, the timing couldn't have been worse. If you remember, at the end of 2008, we were heading into the worst recession that we'd been in in years. The stock market had plunged and plunged and plunged. The world was panicking. The waves were big. The wind was against us, and it was dark, but God was calling, Jesus was calling, and in the end, I did get out of the boat, absolutely terrified by the way.

Of course, that isn't the end of the story because I believe God is still calling, and not just calling to me, but calling to you too. Here's the profoundly unsettling part about this call. He is not in the boat. He's out on the water in the storm. If you let me push the metaphor a little bit, he's not alone. The water is full of people that are going down, about to drown, and I think it's been part of Christ's plan all along that as we get out of the boat and as Jesus grabs on to us that we would reach out and grab onto someone else and pull them up as well.

Let me be clear, this isn't a polite invitation for us to scoot over and make room for someone else in the pew next to us. This is Jesus calling in the midst of a storm in the

middle of the night with waves all around, and he's calling for us to get out of the boat. "Come," Jesus says, "Slip over the side and come."

Now, I wish I could tell you after 10 years with Big Table that the water's just fine and that the storm was just a passing squall, but that wouldn't be the truth. There are still days when I'm terrified, but these last 10 years have also been some of the most wonderful years of my life, and I feel like I get to be more of a pastor now than I've ever been in the past with a huge parish of people that have been either completely invisible to the rest of us or dismissed as loose living, hard drinking screw-ups that aren't worth God's time until they get their lives straightened out. But that's my story. Let's talk about you because I believe that Jesus is calling you too.

Earlier, I asked if you were in the boat. Now let me ask you if you're ready to get out of the boat. I don't know exactly what getting out of the boat might mean for you together as a parish, although the conversation that's going to happen in the Parish Hall afterwards about some of the outreach ministries that you are already involved in may be part of that conversation. I don't know what getting out of the boat might mean for you individually. I hope that some of you might feel called to join us in loving those in the restaurant and hospitality industry, but God's call to others of you will be to something completely different, to someone else who's fighting to stay afloat out there in the water.

Maybe the second I asked this question, you know exactly who it is that God is calling you to reach because you see them, and no one else seems to see them, or maybe you'll only know who God is calling you to care for as you slip over the side of the boat and begin to walk toward Jesus. What I can tell you is that this is where the deepest joy and the greatest adventure of the Christ-formed life is to be found, not cowering in the boat in the storm, but out on the open water with Jesus. Is it safe? Absolutely not, but this is where we meet Jesus. So could it be that Jesus is calling to you today saying, "Come."