

Out of the Boat
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²²[Jesus] made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. ²⁷But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” ²⁸Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” ²⁹He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” ³¹Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” ³²When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

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The night before what was sure to be the hardest test of his life, a test that he was neither prepared for nor sick enough to miss, little Johnny prayed these words: “Now I lay me down to rest. I hope I pass tomorrow’s test. If I die before I wake, that’s one less test I have to take.”

There is, without question, a link between times of intense faith and spirituality and personal or national struggle or hardship. This is evidenced by the short-lived national spike in church attendance following the September 11th attacks in 2001. For whatever reason, many people fall back on faith when things get rough. When things are at their very worst, our faith can seem to be at its very best.

This was certainly the case with the disciples in our reading this morning from Matthew's gospel. According to the author, the twelve had just witnessed one of the greatest miracles ever recorded – Jesus had somehow used them to feed 20,000 men, women, and children on an isolated Palestinian hillside with just five loaves and two small fish. Then, Jesus sent the disciples away, on a boat, and into the night while he remained behind to dismiss the crowds and spend some time alone in prayer.

In the wee hours of the morning, a storm blew up and the disciples found themselves right in the middle of it. According to the text, however, they were nonplussed by the storm. This was a common experience and they were fishers. They knew what to do. Fear overtook them, however, when they observed a phantom-like form walking toward them across the water! While it may seem silly to us to assume that this was in fact a ghost, ancient Greek and Roman mythology held that the seas were the places of the dead. As a Roman-occupied territory, these Palestinian fishers would certainly be familiar with, if not influenced by, these myths. As the specter advanced, it shouted out to them, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Jesus then called to Peter who, strangely emboldened, jumped ship to walk the waters with him. Soon, though, his fear returned, he began to sink, and he cried out. Jesus rescued him, the winds subsided, and in a proclamation of great faith, the disciples professed Jesus to be *the* child of God.

As it so often is with us, when things got rough, Peter called out in faith. Certainly, I do wish to affirm that when life is hard, faith has value and the God of rainbows is present with us when the raindrops are falling. When we are confronted with struggles or hardship, we are right to fall

back on faith, to call out for heaven’s hand, to seek God’s good guidance, to expect comfort and spiritual support, to know that no matter what road we walk, what struggle we face, what hardship we seek to overcome, we cannot go where the divine is not already there. And yet, this text seeks to draw us out, as it did Peter – out of our fear, out of our uncertainty, out of our grief, and our pain, and our past. This text seeks to draw us out of the boat, over the rough waters, and into the light of a new day filled with peace, with possibility, and with promise. Jesus invited Peter to leave the boat behind and enter the waters of what Dr. Brené Brown calls, wholehearted living.

For the past two decades, Dr. Brown, a sociologist, has been studying courage, vulnerability, shame, and empathy and is the author of several New York Times bestsellers. Through her research, Brown has determined that there are at least ten factors that, like the disciples, keep us from wholehearted living. These things become for us, a metaphorical boat that seems safe, but actually keeps us from joining Jesus in the water – from wholehearted living. These are: worrying about what other people think of us, perfectionism, numbing and powerlessness, scarcity, the need for certainty, comparison, exhaustion as a status symbol and productivity as self-worth, anxiety as a lifestyle, self-doubt, and the need for control.¹

By inviting Peter out of the boat, Jesus was essentially inviting him to give up these things – to give up his fear and anything else that was holding him back – to jump into the water, to cross the choppy sea, and discover what goodness awaited him on the other side.

Of course, heaven won’t abandon us if we stay in the boat, if our faith remains strongest when things are toughest, if we really only call out when we feel ourselves starting to sink. But might we be being invited to more adventuresome lives of faith? Might there be more for us and more for our community than simply safety and stability? Might we be being called

¹ Brené Brown. “Daring Greatly,” New York: Penguin Random House, 2015.

out of the boat, over the rough waters, and into the wholehearted lives that are waiting for us and for our church? What holds us back, I wonder?

In 1910, President Theodore Roosevelt delivered a speech at the Sorbonne in Paris that may inspire us if we're struggling to take that first step. He said:

It is not the critic who counts; not the [one] who points out how the strong [one] stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the [one] who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends [themselves] in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if [they] fail, at least fails while daring greatly.²

Daring greatly...I think that's the invitation to us this day. To leave behind the boat of worry, of perfectionism, of powerlessness, of scarcity, certainty, comparison, exhaustion and over-productivity, anxiety, self-doubt, control – to leave behind the boat of fear and step out in faith into the wholehearted lives awaiting us over the rough waters. May it be so. Amen.

² Brian M. Thomsen, Editor. "The Man In The Arena: Selected Writings by Theodore Roosevelt," New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 2003.