

From This Corner

IN OVER OUR HEADS

Matthew 14: 22-36

Larry R. Baird

A message for the Installation Service
October 12, 2003

It is an odd thing if you look at it carefully. It must have been a pivotal time. It was the time shared with us in Matthew 14 when Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of him. Presumably, since some were fishermen, the verb “made” is significant. Surely, they were not reluctant to getting into just any boat. So clearly, this is a new kind of “mission” for the disciples. It was the ship of what was to become the Body of Christ, the Church. Jesus made them get into it while he went off to pray.

It was akin, I think, to a parent sending their teenager out driving for the first time solo. We also note that this is the first time in the gospel according to Matthew that Jesus was in prayer. Parents who have sent their teens on their first solo drives know why Jesus was praying.

If they were to be the Church however, Jesus knew they would have to operate without tangible assurance of his presence. The church henceforth would experience this void. Remember before he had gone with them and when trouble arose, he was there. It was that time when he awoke from sleep and told the troubled waters to “be still,” and the white caps went silent and water’s surface shown silver like a mirror.

Note again that this time they were launching without Jesus. It seemed they were “on their own.” It was a “coming of age” so to speak. The preliminary disciple lessons, Disciple I if you will, were complete. It was now time to see how it would go without the master personally there to handle an emergency.

It went well for some time. The Bible says that the disciples got out there on the seas of ministry “a considerable distance.” (v.24) Ah, how calm the blissful days of early ministry! It is the honeymoon phase most new operations have.

However, the wind was against them. As the Greek puts it “Basanizomenon hupo tone kumaton:” “Being distressed by the waves.” In other words the wind was whacking them. The sailing was rough.

That is when Jesus decided to check in. It says he walked on the sea out to where they were navigating their missionary journey.

It scared them. Apocryphal writings indicate 11 of them headed for the poop deck in the back of the boat. Jesus seeing their panic called out his name “IT IS I.” Which is to say, “The Great I AM” was in their midst. The God of heaven and earth was coming to them and they should shake off anxiety and fear and put on “courage!”

Peter peering forth through the spray, squinting and wiping the seawater from his eyes says
“Lord, if it is you, tell me to come to you on the water.”

“Come,” came God’s word.

Then it happened! Peter walked on water! Yes he did. Look it up. Wide-eyed and hot footing it as though he were barefoot on asphalt at one on an August afternoon. There he went.

It was then his feet sloshing like a little boy in a puddle and his arms flailing in a frantic doggie paddle he began to sink. In his excitement and terror he had an original thought ... “I’m in over my head!”

I love Peter. I do. He is crazy as a loon wanting nothing more than to respond to Jesus’ call upon his life.

He is a fool. A fool for Christ, and he has just enough gifts and graces to usually think he can do it.

I know him well.

How about you?

When Jesus asks, “Do you love me?” Would we not with Peter answer, “Yes, Lord you know I do?”

I confess that is why I said yes, when Bishop Violet said, “Will you do this?”

I respect her very much, but beneath it I was really answering the Lord again, who said, “Larry, do you love me?”

And you know what? It never occurs to me, sisters and brothers, (you need to know this), it never occurs to me that I am in over my head until I am. Here we are. I am at that point again.

Yet I am in good company. Most pastors are that way. Most faithful lay people are that way.

We love the Lord so much we get out of the boat before we have thought better of it. “Oooo,Ooooo, Here I am Lord!” Our hands go up like a kindergarten kid before we consider the cost. Maybe that is a good thing. Otherwise we would count the cost of this being “in over our heads.”

But here’s the good news, and there is good news for us overeager disciples.

The Lord saves people who will get out of the boat and lead! Yes, He will.

The 31st verse is our assurance. Peter in over his head and sinking fast cries out “Lord, save me!” and immediately, Jesus reached out his hand and caught him.

My friends, the Church by virtue of its call is always “in above its head.”

The church is a fragile craft. It is always one gust of wind away from sinking.

Sometimes the shipmates are ill prepared and over confident. Some are naïve to the tenacity of the adversary. Some are theologically inept and more in love with contemporary culture than the gospel of Jesus Christ or have them confused. Some are zealots so in love with their version of the truth they too easily would tear the sail asunder. We are a peculiar lot. We are a motley crew on this ecclesiastical ship.

We must all pray for forgiveness. It is the price of the ticket on the voyage.

As we set sail, the Lord who makes his disciples get in the boat in the first place, is praying for us. Yes he is. You see He has faith in us and wants us to have faith in Him.

He keeps asking repeatedly, “Do you love me?” and if we will say “yes!” He says, “Come.”

That is the decisive moment. Then is the moment of faith.

Ironically, I think, the Lord Jesus will only save us if we get out of the boat and try the impossible.

I don’t believe Jesus scolded the dripping wet Peter, resembling more a drown cat than “The Rock.” He simply accurately described Peter as one of “little faith.”

For Peter’s “little faith” was a dialectic mixture of courage and anxiety, of hearing the word of the Lord and looking at the terror of the storm, of trust and doubt. These things are always an ingredient of Christian experience, even after the resurrection. (New Interpreter’s Bible)

Our district, our conference, our General Church, the Church Universal, set sail many years ago. It has sailed seas calm and serene and oceans that were violently churned by winds of change. The crew has changed many times.

Let me give you what I think is reality. My friends, I see nothing that would suggest that on our watch the course before us is placid. One would have to have the thickest rose-colored glasses ever made to believe we are not in a tumultuous time. Our denomination is struggling with identity issues.

In that identity-battle, some of our local churches have become convinced they can be Christ’s Body solo fueled by the “mega-church phenomenon.” This is a perception that in my opinion is Biblically ignorant and an exercise in self-focused delusion. The church must be global if it is Christ’s church.

Financial concerns are consistently before us. In a culture of conspicuous consumption, it is an all too rare day when we see anything that resembles Biblical stewardship. Church members who in one breath will tell you they have given all they can, will in the next breath tell you they are going to Florida, Arizona, or even Bermuda. Excuse me? Am I missing something here?

Our denomination like most others is struggling with what some have called “the worship wars.” Congregations are in turmoil. We have all seen congregations racked by conflict over whether to sing “Rock of Ages” or “Lord, I Lift Your Name on High.” And we are the people who Jesus has entrusted with his eternal mission?

The world continues to be torn in strife and the gulf between those who have and those who have not. This is a huge issue for those called to “feed the Lord’s sheep.” We may disagree over the methods of doing so, but we must struggle mightily with this issue and what it means for those of us who live in substantial wealth by all worldly standards no matter how “poor” we perceive ourselves to be.

Well, each of those could be a sermon.

Back to the Bible. You and I have been by virtue of our profession that “we are followers of Jesus”, been ordered, and made to get into the boat. If you say “Yes, Lord, I believe,” you have to get in the boat. There are no Christians who do not get into the boat, for the Church is the Body of Christ and without it you and I are only an in-grown toenail.

We have already set sail. The message from the crow’s tower is that the winds are high and the course set is into them. Turns out this is no TV-Church cruise ship with Christian celebrities. It is Christ’s galley, partly propelled by common brothers and sisters of Christ like you and I, and the wind of the Holy Spirit. That is what the Lord has given us, nothing more, nothing less.

Here is the ship, get in it. That is the Lord’s command.

Off we sail into the turmoil and opportunity.

Yet I do believe that if we look there over the waves we see Christ coming over them to us saying “Take courage! It is I! Don’t be afraid.”

My friends, it is time to stretch our “little faith” and take a walk toward the Lord.

I have already warned you. I like Peter am a fool for Christ. I’m stepping out.

My prayer? “Hither by His help I’m come; and I hope, by God’s good pleasure, safely to arrive at home.”

Will you join me sister? Will you join me brother? It is not easy this ministry thing. We need each other. The fact is we are in over our heads. But there’s a bigger head and a hand bigger than yours or mine ready to haul us up for greater service to serve the present age.

So blow you winds! Take your best shot! For the wind in our sails is no other than the Spirit of the Living God ... the very breath of Jesus, and by God's good pleasure we will prevail and together with our brother and sisters in this vessel afloat around the world ... we will arrive safely home.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.