

## “Practicing Pentecost: After Crossing Over”

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And Jesus says to his disciples: “Let us go across to the other side.” (Mark 4:35).

There are three angles or perspectives – maybe “moments” is the best description – that offer us access to this story recorded so early in St. Mark’s narrative. Leaving the Jewish side of Lake Gennesaret or Lake Tiberias, also referred to as the Sea of Galilee, is the first. Crossing the lake, is the second, which is the moment a storm is encountered. And arriving on the other side of the lake, a most unfamiliar place, is the third, where Gentiles, you know – those kind of foreigners – reside.

Our assignment for this new week, which I hope we will accept, is to sit with each of these moments – sit and ponder and pray, something we cannot accomplish in an 18-minute “sermon.” Over the next six days, let’s spend a couple days reflecting on what we may be leaving, and then a couple days on the storm or chaos or disruption we may be entering or perhaps already have entered. And then, spend the last two days of this new week on how we plan to navigate the unfamiliar territory into which we have recently or will soon enter. It is my hope that this “crossing over” story will cast a new light on something out of our personal stories. Or, perhaps, this gospel story will inform what we, together, are experiencing here at First Church, or in our world-wide denomination, or here in Port Angeles or in the nation we love and worry so much about.

Why this story? Well, because in one way or another, pushing off in search of something or someone is something we all do. Sometimes, the searching we do is filled with excitement to see something new, or it may be more of an escape from the demands of whatever we feel we must leave. And the storm? Well, we don’t have to own a boat to know something about storms. A “storm” can a turbulent postscript to our trying lives and work. Or it can be a kind of prelude to the dysfunction we may find, once we hit land on the other side. We’ve all heard stories of get-away cruises that turn a badly-needed vacation into a downright disaster. I hope this week you’ll look honestly at the storms you have experienced in your lives; I’ll try to look at mine. But it is the “after crossing over” moment of this story that I want to spend a few minutes today thinking about. As we attempt to practice Pentecost, we will find ourselves thinking about what happens after we cross over. After.

By the way, many pastors and churches throughout our beloved denomination are crossing over this next week, from what was familiar to a place very unfamiliar, maybe even strange. We are not, thank God, but many are moving from one church to another, sending off one pastor (and his or her family) and receiving another. After the crossing, soon after the keys are given and the books and pictures are put in place, people will begin to ask “How did we get here? And what will we do now?”

Now, on the surface, today’s gospel reading seems like a story about a handful of people on a small boat, crossing over a large lake, scared by a giant storm, which ends with Jesus orchestrating yet another surprising learning and an easy landing.

If you receive my weekly “REview, PREview” and read the brief email through to the end, you discovered Steve Garnass-Holmes’ reminder that this shore-to-shore, chaos-to-calm crossing-over story takes us well beneath the surface. He writes:

“You know, don’t you, that (Jesus) never simply means the far side of the lake? He wants us to think about “the other side. The other side of the tracks. The other side of the border. The other side of life. Beyond the familiar, the safe, the manageable. The other side of the argument. Another viewpoint. The other side of the conflict. The other side of yourself. The other side of the veil. The unseen. Let us go there. Let us explore the dark side of our hearts. Let us stand in solidarity with those who are the “other.” See the world in an “other” way. Don’t worry. The Beloved will go with us.”

After crossing over it is good to ask – Did we make it because we bailed water like mad till Jesus spoke the power of peace into our lives? What is it that moves us from fear to faith? When you come to think about it, fear and faith make sense only in relation to something that is unknown, challenging, difficult, or threatening. After crossing over is the perfect time to look honestly at what scares us. But it is also true that the very scary things that frighten us may be the very things we end up summoning enough faith to actually face. One writer made this discovery while reading today’s story: “It is not the miracle Jesus performs that makes the difference. Indeed, the disciples seem almost more afraid than they did previously.... It is trust, in the end, it is trust, alone, that overcomes fear. Ultimately, you see, the question isn’t what moves us from fear to faith, but who. And the answer is Jesus, the one who will not rest until we...trust God’s passionate love for us and all the world.” (David Lose, *Meanwhile*)

Not what miracle but who is with us. By the way, Claire and I heard about a dozen new ordinands, those who will be ordained in today’s service at Annual Conference, answer John Wesley’s historic questions, and one of the questions is “Have you faith in Christ?” Not what, but who, indeed! It is a question asked after crossing over, asked of us still! And when we get around to practicing Pentecost, it will be when we rediscover the trustworthiness of who is with us.

I’ll close with a Sam Wells story, you know the vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields in London. Sam recently officiated a funeral of a woman whom he really didn’t know. But what he did know was that several months of severe and uncontrollable pain of a wasting disease motivated her to crawl out of bed, put on slippers and a dressing gown, let herself into the back garden, climb the low fence, walk into the local lake, and drown herself. A week later Sam paid a visit to the widower and was fully prepared for him to say how meaningful the funeral was. The man looked straight at Sam and spoke the following:

“What you said was completely wrong. You said, ‘We don’t know what was going through her head when she got out of bed and walked down to the lake.’ That’s not true. I know exactly what she was thinking. She’d tried before, and afterwards she told me what it was like. I know what she was thinking. I told you that when you came to see me last time. But you weren’t listening, were you? Maybe you didn’t want to listen.”

And then Sam shared this: “I learned something that day.... If something is awful for somebody else...my role is not to make things better. Not just because I can’t, but for two other reasons. Reason one is that almost any attempt I make to suggest things are really okay and that the person needn’t be so miserable is bound to be superficial and trite, and so it will actually increase the other person’s isolation, which is a big part of what they’re struggling with in the first place. Reason two is that however ineffective this effort is (at persuading the other person), I may end up convincing myself—making it all the more likely that I’ll get fed up with their misery, lose patience, and walk away.” (*Christian Century*, April 2018)

On this last Sunday of my fourth year as your pastor and a week before the beginning of my fifth year with you, I want to state that I’m learning that my role is not to make things better, because that might leave you and me more isolated than before. Instead, I want to get better at standing with you, as you and I, together, face what may be difficult days. If a storm, something awful, is on the horizon, I will try not to say “Oh, it’s not so bad.” What I want to find are the words to say “This seems very painful; let’s talk about what will likely be the hardest part for us. Can we find the words to share, so that we are not thinking about the hard parts on our own?” After crossing over, when we have a choice between giving each other false hope and giving each other the truth, let’s work at sharing only the truth. If we are giving each other “false hope,” well, once it becomes obvious, we will end up feeling worse off than before.

But if we can name and face the truth—and find that we haven’t scared each other away, if we stay with the truth and walk through it, then we can come out the other side. We will discover, God willing, that love is as strong as death, that calm is as real as chaos, stability is as possible as storm, that beauty lies at the root of darkness. Thanks be to God.