

5th Sunday after Pentecost
June 24, 2018
Church of the Advent

We Are Not Perishing



There is something about reaching an age when there are more years behind me than in front of me that opens up memories of things that happened in my life a long time ago. Probably triggered by today's gospel, one recently came back sharp and clear, along with the sights, sounds and smells from a trip with Outward Bound I took in my mid-twenties that focused on learning to sail a 30-foot open boat with a dozen other people in the ocean off the coast of Maine. Why I chose this adventure as a vacation is less clear in my mind than the experience itself—but when you live in Georgia going to Maine in the Summer has a lot of appeal. If you read the Outward Bound literature, you find all the expectations and goals you might expect: learning compass navigation, small boat seamanship, and group dynamics; what I remember about the experience has less to do with hoisting sails and reading wind, and more to do with surviving days on open water between wilderness islands with people both more and less afraid than I was that surely we all would perish. My most vivid learning was how cold water could be and still not be frozen. We jumped off a dock into it every early morning after a long wake-up run around the rocky perimeter of our base camp—the only option for what might be considered bathing. That cold water was shocking to body and spirit, and I remember thinking just how much of it there *was* when we were far from land in our 30 foot open pulling boat.

Our gospel story today is set on the waters of the Sea of Galilee—probably not as cold as Penobscot Bay, but still about 64 square miles of water. The disciples had just been on the Western shore—home territory for the Jews, where Jesus had been teaching them in parables to help them understand a new paradigm for the Kingdom of God—seeds sown in the ground, a light under a bushel basket, a mustard shrub—visions very different than their experience with

kingdoms of men—royalty and wealth, conquering armies, subjects supporting it all as farmers, or fishermen. Jesus was preaching to his choir on the West side of the Sea, though he would meet so much resistance there that he would see himself as a prophet without honor in his own country whose inhabitants were sheep without a shepherd.

The Eastern side of the Sea was more densely inhabited by gentiles—pagans who were not believers in the one true God—not part of the community of the children of Israel. Jesus crossed from the West to the East of the Sea of Galilee and back again at least four times in the gospels—mostly by boat, sometimes by walking around the shore with crowds trailing after him. He healed everywhere and indiscriminately—people in the crowds, lepers, unclean women, people who acted as if possessed by demons, dying children, relatives and servants of Roman Centurions, and Peter’s mother-in-law. The social standing of Jews—*his* kind of people—did not give them exclusive worthiness to be healed. Jesus responded to suffering when he encountered it, and reached out to those who needed him, and were willing to listen to him and believe, regardless of who they were or where they came from. Everyone was worthy—gentiles included.

Let us go across to the other side. What might the disciples have been thinking? Was Jesus trying to escape the crowds to take a break? Were they just on an adventure? Were some of them grumbling at the prospect of going to unfamiliar territory where they might be threatened by strangers? Did they think taking the boat at night was crazy? In any case, Jesus—not a fisherman or sailor—went sound asleep on a cushion in the stern, showing neither excitement nor anxiety about the voyage. It was more likely he saw his ministry as inclusive of the other side of the sea, inclusive of all people—even gentiles—and this was just another leg of his journey.

When a storm came up with a great wind threatening to swamp their boat, even the experienced fishermen on board became frightened, believing they were all going to die. In the panic of threat, we can imagine them cursing—why were they out there in the dead of night in a storm in the first place—why they had let Jesus talk them into this? It is significant that Jesus was soundly sleeping through a storm so rough that the boat was being swamped with waves—surely it would have been very loud, and very wet by this time, with much rocking back and forth. How could Jesus sleep through all that—while they were surely perishing? Do you know how annoying it is for someone to be obliviously calm when you are anxiously in crisis mode trying to cope with an impending disaster that you can see coming and they seem to minimize? That’s what it must have felt like when they had to *wake him up*. Notice they did not ask him to fix it, or even indicate that they believe he could—they just wanted him at least to be awake enough to feel bad for getting them into that mess! And then comes the punchline, which could be a meme for all time when it comes to the relationship between God and humans: *Why are you afraid?* Of course this came only after he had rebuked the wind and calmed the sea with just a few words, as if he did it every day, *Peace, be still!*

Why *are* we afraid? Why do we feel tossed around and blown to bits on a regular basis when we are fully aware that Jesus is blissfully sleeping in the stern of the boat? On the sea of this life in our time, our fear of perishing takes on many forms; we are afraid of so many things. We are afraid of responsibility, afraid of over-commitment, afraid of losing our identity, our

heritage, our way of life. We are afraid of losing our livelihood, our leisure, our money, our property. We are afraid there will never be enough. We are afraid of illness, infirmity, aging, abandonment and dying. We are afraid of people who are not like us—whatever our own version of gentiles is—and would prefer it if they would stay on the other side of the sea. We lock our doors and arm ourselves and close our borders because we are afraid. We are so afraid that we are unable to believe that the Teacher *cares* that we might be perishing, so our fear leads us to take matters into our own hands, try to save ourselves, throw Jesus overboard if necessary, and leave those we fear on other shores to fend for themselves. And then over and over we find ourselves adrift, uncertain of our purpose, because we followed fear. But fear is a liar who is out to steal our faith, our hope, and the joy that comes in seeing by God’s abundance that there is always enough, and enough multiples when it is shared.

Being a Christian is a lifetime journey across the sea in a boat with Jesus. Sometimes the seas are calm, the skies are clear and the wind is a breeze of blessing. Sometimes the storms come up fast and furious, making us doubt our decision to believe the trip would be worth the risk. Our faith does not completely prevent our *fear* of perishing, but it offers us the challenge Paul gave to the Corinthians to open wide our hearts, because with the power of God right beside us.

We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything. (2 Corinth 6:8-10)

I remember being afraid a lot on that Outward Bound adventure. Uncomfortable, uncertain, out of control and afraid. In spite of all of that, I survived—mostly I think by having an open mind and an open heart to those who travelled with me, and trusting in the One whom even the wind and the seas obey to get us back to port.

When evening had come, Jesus said to his disciples, “Let us go across to the other side.” And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was.

As disciples of Jesus, we are called at times to go across to the *other* side—whatever that means in our own context—to places unfamiliar where we will feel uncertain, not in control, afraid, and unsure that those in need of healing and hearing the Good News we encounter there are even worth our time and trouble—if we can even get there in one piece. Yet by the power of the One whom even the wind and the seas obey, and hearts wide open to those who travel with us and those we travel to, we need not be afraid; we will not perish. And salvation awaits on the other shore. Amen