

Proper 14 year A 2011

“When they got into the boat the wind ceased”

I have always had a fascination for boats...we always had a runabout during our growing up, usually around eighteen to twenty one or two feet in length, so that we could go fishing in the gulf when the weather was favorable....compass notwithstanding, I never liked getting outside sight of land....always breath a slight sigh of relief when we returned to land... Loved to watch the boats on the bay at night...I loved our boats but I always had a healthy respect for the unpredictable waters upon which these boats would make their way....but my fascination doesn't come nearly as close to the fascination with boats that Katharine's father had...I think he must have dreamed often about them sleeping...and waking he was always reading about them...He designed several and had them made by salty artisans from Cedar Key Florida all the way to Grand Isle Louisiana. He would find some unsuspecting, down on his luck boat builder who would catch the vision of what it was that Rhett had in mind, the vessel of his dreams.....He never achieved the perfect boat....after one was completed he started dreaming of another one....sail boat or power boat ...he loved them both....I think if he had had his way he would have died at sea....but his remains most certainly are there, a half a mile off old beacon beach in Panama City (he left us the GPS setting for his interment in the bay)...If he ever feared the power and unruliness of the sea I never heard him speak of it....In fact he had a framed cartoon depicting a mariner in his foul weather gear looking outside the pilot house of his vessel at a ferociously turbulent storm and saying....gosh, I bet they're catching hell back on land! Perhaps he had some harrowing experience at sea when he was in the Coast Guard during World War II, or a frightening encounter with the water as a boy that imbued him with a quiet courage and knowledge and skill when it came to boats and matters maritime... I always trusted his boats under the mastery of his skilled hands... though I never could tie a knot to suit him...Katharine's older brother put a few photographs together in a collage of Rhett at the helm of his last boat with the inscription “Sail on, Captain Rhett.”

Boats have fascinated many over the ages...in the world of the arts and literature they are archetypes of something profound in the collective unconscious of humankind....there must be millions of paintings of boats... In ancient oral tradition, the myth of Noah and the flood, a myth told in many cultures around the world...the boat a means of preserving life on earth against the murderous wrath of nature.....And in ancient literature,

Odysseus and his crew at sea for twenty years perilously and circuitously making their way home... and the great 19th century novel Moby Dick...the boat a means not just of commerce and exploration, but the means of pursuit of the truth of the nature life force itself... and the means of survival and the encountering of mysterious beauty and finally the means of death at the last... It is the story of life as universal epicthe boat, I think, is an archetype of the resilience of life, and of its danger all in one....the human enterprise making its way upon a capricious sea...battered on some journeys....sweet perfection on others...the sunrises and sunsets never the same at sea...omens and unexpected adventure aplenty...It is the human enterprise encountering its most primordial relationship with chaos, which can utterly destroy and which can abundantly give life....the sea voyage a story of the mystery and beauty and danger of this earthly life...perhaps a symbol of the cosmos itself...artists refer to journeys at sea as journeys of change...which is what life is...no certainty...only mysterious contingency and mutability.

Our gospel passage today follows in this ancient genre of symbolism. Every hearer in the Matthean community would recognize the motif of the age-old struggle with the chaos of the sea. It would remind them of God in the beginning moving over the waters of chaos and bringing life-giving order... They would remember God's passionate soliloquy in the book of Job, exulting in the dangerous beauty, God's artistry of the created order....

The fanciful story of Jesus' walking on water to this post-resurrection audience seeks to connect Jesus and the Jesus community to God in the beginning, moving over the waters of chaos, bringing order, providing saving protection.... Jesus in this passage...lest they don't get the point.... says "don't be afraid, it is I"... "ego ami" in the Greek....which literally means *I am*...the same words God says to Moses when Moses asks God to disclose the divine name...so this is the creation story and the liberation from slavery in Egypt story revisited....I said this is a post-resurrection story as well....It was written and read to an audience, a struggling church community perhaps in Antioch or Rome, some fifty years after Jesus' death and resurrection...It has the marks of a resurrection story similar to the other resurrection stories in the gospels: the disciples are gathered together....there appears someone whom they don't recognize...they are afraid....and then in recognizing the risen Christ their fears are assuaged and order is restored... these are words told to a group of Christians whose lives possibly are at stake....a people in danger...a people for the sake of the gospel being battered by the forces of chaos in their world...a people needing assurance.

We've heard this gospel preached many times...and we usually hear it preached thus: that if I...if I just had enough faith (as if faith were a quantifiable thing) then I would not sink into the abyss....But that is not the point of the story....In a moment of passion Peter...Peter the everyman for Matthew (much less so in Mark), Peter who represents the church.... insists that he leave the boat to prove his faith, and because he becomes fearful he sinks....Jesus saves him....but they don't both go skipping across the waters happily ever after....Jesus takes Peter back to the boat and they both climb aboard we are told....the unspoken question then in this story is: Peter, why'd you leave the boat? This is a story about the power and resilience of the faith community, our strength together....the wind ceases not at the command of Jesus as the story is told in Mark.... But here in Matthew the wind ceases at their returning to the boat....the boat....the ship of fools... the ship of state.... the imaginative human enterprise....the imperfect boat, the church on its intrepid missionand there is one thing true about a boat...you've got to trust and get along with your fellow travelers, fools and all, whether we like them or not (the possible exception: a carnival cruise)...there's no choice in the matter....thank God we're stuck with each other, therefore we by faith must make the best of this journey.....As the church we bind ourselves one to another for the good of the boat, its courageous crew and our Lord and captain among us who inspires us onward bearing the adventurous dream, the dream of a life of hope and dignity and well-being....Our captain who has somehow plumbed the depths of the sea's most terrible chaos and is yet unafraid, skilled, knowledgeable... perhaps that is the truth of death and resurrection....death and resurrection the cycle of life itself....perhaps courage is engendered by some experience of death or the possibility of death....and then the experience of new life.... (John Donne the poet priest asks God to "batter his heart" to open him to new life) this death and resurrection cycle is the means, the sea voyage over life's journey by which we will learn not to be afraid and the means by which we will become skilled and to become knowledgeable with such cosmic maritime matters as well.

I believe Matthew is saying to his people...trust the boat and her captain...even when we are battered by the turbulence of life....even when life hangs in the balance...and that we can't live a life of faith alone....the life of faith is not a solitary enterprise....It is life lived in imaginative community.....and further, Matthew, throughout his gospel, exhorts us to rescue others from their sinking into fear and despair and indignity...Let us, the risen Christ in our own day and age, living the resurrection story...let us reach out and catch hold of them and bring them safely aboard this ship of

faith.... Our foundling brothers and sisters that need not fear the sea of chaos....

In empowered and enlightened community, not as solitary souls.... but as the faithful gathered, the winds of chaos will cease in its anger and allow God's saving grace to calm the fears and strife of our world...so that the boat that bears as its precious cargo God's dream of a perfect world will persistently make its way...its wake glimmering in the light of sun and moon...Dear people of God...trust the boat...and trust her captain.