

Proper 14 Year A 2014

“When they got into the boat the wind ceased.”

Since time immemorial humankind has been fascinated by the sea...the gulf... Its mystery, its beauty... Perhaps it is because it is where we come from... Our very DNA fashioned by the sea’s genius... Over the ages art, literature, music, science... have all paid due homage to our great mother...According to mythology, the sea existed before the very beginning. It always was... It was only until God moved over its depths in ecstatic, imaginative, creative reverie with the words “let there be” that time and space began.... A tremulous and tentative order fashioned, issued forth from the primeval chaos.

Of course humankind’s relationship with the sea has been an ambiguous one... a love, hate relationship, as it were... The sea is at once life giving and at once deadly... It is beautiful and terrible... If it is home to the life force... then it is also the home of death as well... One reality.... Beautiful... terrifying.

Over the millennia humankind has contended, negotiated with the sea... built vessels whose designs have evolved and been honed over the ages that served as means for transportation, sustenance and commerce... vessels to artfully engage the sea’s mystery....boats themselves have become archetypes in the human psyche... representative of our engagement with life and death and what lies in between.... A symbol of the soul making its way amid the random improbabilities of the created order.... Not so much an order, but an improvised unfolding of what is.

All this to say that in Matthew’s gospel the writer is drawing on the ancient, powerful mythology of water, the sea, to make his point... any listener attuned to the Biblical tradition hearing this marvelous story of Jesus walking on the water would be reminded of God moving over the waters of chaos in the beginning... Indeed the birth of the people of Israel came about through the waters of the Red sea... their liberation from slavery into a life as a people... And such a story would evoke the memory of other stories of sea voyages... of Odysseus, of the Argonauts... of Noah... everymen in the high drama aboard ship contending with life and death on the high seas... Our story in our reading today is simply a variation on the theme.... Not literal history, but a literary representation of what we know deep down to be true... really true.

Now first a word about boats.... The thing about boats is this.... You’ve got to trust the people you are with on a boat.... You have no

choice...the longer you are at sea the more you'll know of the people you are with... the good and the bad... you don't necessarily have to like them (though it helps)... but you do have to trust them, like it or not...And when you think of it... you really have to be kinda cool to get on a boat... When at sea you have to trust the gifts of your shipmates while at the same time forbearing their folly... because when you are at sea, even for just a pleasure cruise, everything is at stake... You have entered a reality that is beautiful and dangerous... a reality that is tenuous, provisional, uncertain....Tenuous, provisional, uncertain... like life itself.

So to our story... The disciples find themselves on the water in a boat in a storm... they are fearing for their lives and they see Jesus, a ghostly figure walking on the water near the boat... Peter, Matthew's principal protagonist, his everyman, steps out of the boat and walks on the water towards Jesus until he is gripped by fear and almost drowns... Jesus rescues him and takes him back to the boat asking him why he doubted... and when they reach the boat we are told that the wind ceased... Now you and I have heard many sermons on this famous and familiar passage... but most of the sermons I have heard make this point... that if one just has enough faith... keeps one's eyes on Jesus as we walk over the tumultuous waters then we will not sink... we and Jesus will waltz across the waters and live happily ever after... something like that... and of course, we are all set up to fall short in that story, reinforcing the Calvinistic doctrine of our being unworthy... But I don't think that is what the story is saying to us.... I think Jesus offstage is saying to Peter... Why did you get out of the boat?! Did you lose faith in your shipmates? Don't you know that it is in the boat with your friends...Even friends not necessarily of your choosing...the ones given to you for this voyage... It is in the boat with them that you will be saved from danger....And indeed didn't the wind, Peter, stop when you got back in the boat?...This, brothers and sisters, is a story about community... That salvation is a community enterprise... that our salvation comes with serving the common good... serving the voyage.... We are not to look for a ghostly magic Jesus out there to save us, but that Jesus lives and moves among us, in solidarity for the sea voyage ahead.... It is in our breaking bread with one another, supporting one another... and above all, trusting one another that we are saved from the perils of the sea... from the perils of life itself...not that we won't experience peril, we surely will... but in the boat, the experience will have meaning and purpose... in common with our friends, in common... the way we are meant to live... and serving the way ahead, the voyage to a shore of dignity and well being will bring growth and resilience.

Aside from the creation and liberation mythology from which this story draws... there is also the contextual reality that this gospel is written post resurrection... written after 70 A.D., some forty years after Jesus' death and resurrection.... so all of the theology of Matthew's gospel is resurrection theology... Every appearance of Jesus in this gospel is a resurrection appearance... resurrection, not some ghostly supernatural fantasy... but resurrection that is engendered in the community of souls all making their way across the sea of life... to keep our eyes on Jesus is to love one another... to trust each other's gifts and to forbear each other's folly.... Stay in the boat, dear friends of God on this adventure on the sea... every single day utterly different from the other... A day, each day on the water is utterly new, random, diverse, beautiful... and dangerous... you will see rare beasts and make remarkable discoveries... you will see phenomena beyond your own reckoning.... Trust the boat you are in... Have faith in your fellow mariners, because it's all we have, really... and be thankful for the boat you are in, and give thanks for your unlikely friends who journey with you... because among you is life... real life.

We are people of the waters.... The waters of baptism, the waters of creation... the waters that have always been... And as mariners we know deep down that this voyage on the sea is accomplished only in solidarity with each other... The promise, the vision given to us is that such love engendered among us will make beauty amid the storms sure to come... beauty, calm, peace, well being...that is the genius of life.... that in solidarity we are raised above fear and despair... Resurrection life is, a shared life of courage and hope and joy that we can't know without each other... and that the world can't know unless it is shared with all.... That is the simple truth as best I can see it... a deep truth I think from the beginning of time... as deep as the ocean.