

My spiritual director shared with me recently a word I'd never heard of: *peregrinatio*. It's a kind of journey or quest where one relies entirely upon God to determine the destination and to deliver one there. Apparently it was a practice of Celtic monks to embark on pilgrimage in this way – to get into a little boat or coracle without oars, cast themselves into the sea. Wherever they landed was to be considered “the place of their resurrection.”

Peregrinatio. If anyone thinks that Celtic spirituality is about sweet tunes to the harp and weaving flowers into your hair and walking in the woods, you would be wrong. It mostly involved standing in crashing waves in a frigid sea and personal tests of faith that were completely over the top.

Still, I have a bit of Irish in me, and I love this idea of getting into a boat with no oars. Or let me be honest, I would actually hate to get into a boat with no oars and have to trust in where God were taking me. But I think it's a fairly accurate view of the kind of trust and obedience that is required of the prophet and the disciple. If you are going to work for God, you are going to have to let God do the planning, the driving and the steering. And set the course. You might not be clued into where you are going until you have arrived to “the place of your resurrection.” That implies a kind of death along the way. If you need a ritual to make that real, then hopping into the sea in a boat with no oars does it. My Irish ancestors had imagination, if nothing else.

Today's Scriptures, though, do have that sense of *peregrinatio*, calls and journeys that are entirely in God's hands, with places of resurrection if you follow the story to the end. And interestingly today's Scriptures involve boats and water and calls and being sent places that either one doesn't want to go, or that have an unclear trajectory.

Today's story from Jonah actually takes place after the prophet has dried out from his three-day ride in the belly of a fish, to a land that he did not want in any way to visit: Ninevah. Ninevah in these stories was sort of a stand in name for the vast empire of Israel's enemies, ones who would kill you on sight if you showed up without an invitation. Jonah's original call – the one that he unsuccessfully tried to turn down – was to go to the land of his pagan enemies and tell them that God said they were going to be destroyed because of their evil ways. It's no wonder Jonah did not want to go – it was a suicide mission. But he had signed up to be a prophet of the Lord. And while he did not plan it, he ended up in a vessel without oars – no one but God can steer a fish.

If Ninevah was the place of Jonah's resurrection, it certainly took him awhile to accept it. In fact, the King of Ninevah, got the message right away, even though Jonah only took it a few days journey into the great country. It must have sounded a bit like – the reign of God is at hand, repent and believe, with a very big “or Else” attached. It wasn't up to Jonah to convince the king, just to bear God's message. God would do the rest – and in fact seems to have fully intended to smite all of Ninevah. Accept that the King took him seriously and called for universal fasting and sack-cloth wearing in honor of the God of Israel. Even the animals put on the itchy fabric of repentance. Read on and you'll find that Jonah had to get over his own resentment and judgement about that; he didn't approve of God's mercy after all the trouble he went

through. Jonah was reluctant, but not an entirely lost cause. For our purposes, our first reading is about the power of *God's will and God's way* – of *God's peregrinatio* with us.

Contrast Jonah with the disciples that Jesus calls. In a fashion worthy of a classic folk saga, they hear the word and they promptly follow. First Simon and Andrew, then James and John, the son's of Zebedee. Unlike the full saga of Jonah, there is very little detail here, no vacillating, no big fish, accept the interesting note that they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired hands when they set off to follow Jesus.

Which means that Jesus tended to call followers who had something to lose, something to give up, something to die to before they followed him. That's the pattern of Jesus, who follows the pattern of his own Abba – worship no god but me, trust me completely with your way and your destination, and you will be my people and I will be your God. God's covenant has always looked a little like a boat with no oars, unless you understand God to be the boat, the sails, the wind, and the destination.

Jesus is asking these Galilean fisherman to give up the family business, the security of a good income and future, to get out of their father's boat and into his father's boat. I wonder if they would think back on this on nights when they are out with Jesus during storms at sea. Whatever the case, in Mark's gospel off they go, without a word, to help Jesus announce the good news that God is taking over, and that the divine Kingdom is at hand. It's Good News for some, at least. Those in Israel who longed for God's justice and mercy and law to overcome the shabby treatment Israel got from so many conquerors and emperors in their day, they welcomed that announcement. Rome was not unlike Ninevah in the popular imagination – despotic, oppressive, an enemy of Israel. Jesus had many followers who wanted someone to overthrow the despots and have a new King blessed by God.

I read one commentary that said that the sweet idea of fishing for people has a bit of a darker tone to it. "The phrase suggests a somewhat harsh and negative activity of ensnaring for judgement," write the authors of the article on the passage in the Oxford Bible Commentary.¹

That seems a bit harsh, but it's also important to remember that giving up everything, leaving a past life and entering a bold new adventure with God likely felt a lot like launching a little boat with no oars into a crashing sea. The word repent does not mean behave better, but to turn complete away from an old way of life, and step into a new one; leave your old idols and turn to the One True God. Like Ninevah in the story of Jonah, where even the cows wore sackcloth. That was the message that John the Baptist preached, and it got him arrested and ultimately killed. So Mark offers a bit of foreshadowing as well.

Give them time -- these earnest and willing followers of Jesus will get just as surly and difficult as Jonah did. They will have their own visits to the belly of the beast. At times they were reluctant, but not an entirely lost cause. As with Jonah, it wasn't up to them to convince the crowds, just to bear God's message to them. Jesus would do the rest – For our purposes, today's Gospel is about the power of *God's will and God's way* – of *God's peregrinatio* as Jesus.

¹ Muddiman, John; Barton, John. *The Gospels (Oxford Bible Commentary)* (p. 89). OUP Oxford. Kindle Edition.

Jesus' disciples will not have an easy sojourn to the place of their own resurrection. They will see Jesus do and say some astonishing things that speak to a whole new world at hand – sick people healed, dead people raised, outcasts welcomed, hungry crowds fed. And that band of followers themselves will go hungry some days. They will run for their lives, and many will lose them. They will see their beloved teacher arrested and tortured and killed. And their Ninevah will not put on sackcloth and ashes, but the Roman Empire will instead pull the Temple to the ground and scatter Israel far and wide. In the end though, following Jesus will bring them to the place of their resurrection. All of this can be described as the cost of discipleship.

What is the takeaway for us, we 21st century disciples and prophets? On a snowy weekend the drive to church can seem pretty treacherous, to be sure. But for the most part, being a Christian does not come with too many consequences. What is our boat that we are to get into? What is our place of resurrection?

And so I want to turn us to the example of a more recent disciple, who has helped many of us to see what it means to hop in the boat with no oars, and that's Emily, Emily Richards. I want to remind us that in addition to being a friend, and a pastor, and a priest – she was first and foremost a disciple, a follower of Jesus. Emily and I would get together to talk in the year before I was ordained, when she served as a mentor for me. And I recall her story being a joyful call to follow Christ, in a church that both introduced Jesus to her and welcomed her gifts of ministry, with bishops that made a way for her to become a priest. It was joyful, and she was joyful, the kind of joy that bears pain in the other hand, that knows risks and consequences, and takes them and bears them in the name of life.

Part of the gift that she brought to others in the name of Christ was her incredible life force, one that burned brighter than the body she was given to carry it in, shaped as it was by juvenile rheumatoid arthritis.

Like Jonah and like those first disciples, her job wasn't to convince anyone of God's will and way, that was God's job. Hers was just to carry the message. And she did that with her life, and her friendship, and her empathy, her vulnerability and her trust, and her ability to throw doors wide open for people to come in.

Those are all the charisms of a disciple. And while at times I think Emily's body might have seemed to her like a boat with no oars, it brought her in the end to the place of her resurrection. And this is where the whole story takes us – the old Testament and the New, the story of the church, and of Emily and of us – it takes us to the place of our resurrection. The kingdom of God, no longer near at hand, but right underfoot. where sorrow and pain are no more; neither sighing, but life everlasting.

Amen.