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When Jesus puts us back in the boat we were in The Rev. Barbara Ballenger

I think our Scriptures today count among the most cherished stories in the bible. They are certainly among my favorites. I mean who can't love Elijah hiding in the cave after fleeing the wrath of Jezebell all to encounter God in that still small voice? Isn't that just what we all hope? That instead of appearing in terrifying manifestations, God might whisper in our ear all that we long to hear?

And then that story of Peter, our patron. Always jumping out of boats and into trouble. But this time he almost makes it. You can almost hear the color commentator now. *"Oh look that's Peter making a break for it, challenging Jesus to summon him forward. And he's doing it, Peter is actually walking on the water, ladies and gentlemen. Except, no wait, his faith is lagging, he's looked away from the Jesus and at the waves around him, and he's going doowwwwn! And here's Jesus with the save folks. Peter and Jesus are back in the boat and it's Jesus 1, scary wind 0 in our race across powers of the deep."*

Or that has been my interpretation in the past. And I had it wrong.

Today's stories from the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures are indeed about faith. But they are not so much about whether the followers have faith in God, but whether they have faith in where God had placed them – in what they had been called to do. In both cases, God sends frightened, somewhat arrogant and overall foolish followers back where they came from. Back to the work and the environment God had originally placed them in.

First let's consider Elijah. God had called him to assist in the divine effort to win back Israel from its worship of false gods. God had sent a three-year famine upon Israel because their King Ahab married a pagan named Jezebell who got everyone hooked on worshipping the god Baal. The prophet Elijah gets into this famous contest with the prophets of Baal, and does mighty feats that speak of the power of the God of Israel, and then Elijah ends up killing them all. Then Elijah runs for his life after Queen Jezebell threatens to kill him for what he has done.

Elijah runs all the way to Mt. Horeb, the place where Moses used to speak with God. It takes him 40 days and 40 nights. He goes to the very cave where Moses encountered God passing by. Even though Elijah is told to stand on the mountain to behold the passing of God, he doesn't leave the cave until there is silence. Only then does he come out to encounter the presence of God, and God says:

"What are you doing here, Elijah?"

I think God uses that tone that sort of implies, why aren't you doing what I sent you to do? Haven't I pulled you out of every jam you ended up in, fed you, sent you to shelter, given you divine power, sent you angels with lunch? So what are you doing here Elijah?

And Elijah answers by walking around the truth a bit – he was not in fact the last of the prophets of Israel. Israel had in fact begun to repent. [1]

But his life was in danger, which is not actually unusual for Elijah. And he was scared. And so he fled all the way back to the place where God befriended Moses. Essentially Elijah is saying "save me Lord."

And God saves him by sending him back to the work he had been sent to do. Back to the wilderness of Damascus where he must select new Kings for divided Israel, a prophet to replace himself, and get back to the work of bringing Israel back to God.

And that is what Elijah does. That still, small voice spoke louder than the storm, and more powerfully than the earthquake, and it got its way. A lot of moms use that really quiet voice.

Elijah hadn't lost his faith in God, but I think he lost his zeal for the work that God had set him to do. His salvation came in turning around and going back. That, we say all the time around here, is what repentance is. Turning round.

Our story of Peter isn't that different really. It picks up on where we left off last week. You'll remember that Jesus went to this deserted place to spend time alone in prayer with God after the death of John the Baptist. The crowds found him. He was moved with compassion and preached to them and healed them. Then he helped his disciples feed them with five loaves and two fishes. And at the end of all of that Jesus was truly and rightfully exhausted. He still had some praying and some grieving to do.

So he sent his disciples off in the boat they came in. I understand the Greek for that verb isn't just "made them get in the boat" but is more like compelled, constrained or forced them in the boat.[2] Regardless Jesus put them in that boat and he told them to start rowing. And leave him alone. So he could go up the mountain to pray. Because he was done.

By evening, from his place up on the mountain, he could see that they are being battered about by the wind, that they are far from the shore. By the following morning, he was ready to join them.

Jesus takes the direct route -- right across the water, through waves, despite the wind, unperturbed. He is walking the walk of the Divine here in a matter familiar to Israel. Commentator Nicholas Schaser points out how the book of Job describes God as trampling the waters before humanity was created, and God asked Job if he had ever walked upon the recesses of the deep. So walking on water is a divine thing. It reminds Israel that God is creator of all things and master of even the terrifying deep with its demons and sea monsters. It is the realm of God.

And here comes Jesus doing that very thing. And that's more terrifying and disorienting than the wind and the waves. And they are afraid of what they are seeing.

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[1] See Vanessa Lovelace's commentary on this passage on Working Preacher.org

[2] See commentary by Zina Jacque on WorkingPreacher.org

But Peter, among them, doubts. He asks one of these questions that usually get put on the lips of satan, the high priests or the "mockers of the cross": "if it's really you, then …. If you're really the son of God, why don't you …."[3] Peter's says "if it's really you, command me to come to you on the water."

Everyone else knew that it was Jesus talking to them, they were just terrified at what Jesus was doing.

But Peter challenged him. And Jesus shrugged, I'm guessing, and said "ok. Come."

He might as well have been saying "what are you doing here, Peter?"

It's not Peter's lack of faith in Jesus that causes Peter to sink. He was destined to go down. Because Peter was not the master of the waves or the creator of the deep. God is, as is his son, Jesus.

The wisest thing that Peter managed to say was "save me Lord." And so Jesus reached down, turned Peter around, put him back in the boat. And we know what turning means.

Jesus saved Peter by putting him back where he had placed him at the beginning, into the boat with the rest of the disciples, sending him back to the work he had been sent to do. Commentator Mark Hoffman, who was also my Greek teacher in seminary by the way, points out that Jesus gets back in the boat with his followers, crossing the sea to minister to those on the other side. That is the call of the church, to be together in this work, with Jesus among us.

He writes: "A ship was one of the earliest symbols for Christianity, and this story indicates why it was attractive: when surrounded by adversity, safety and salvation are experienced in the church with Jesus in its midst. But remember that a ship is not a static symbol. It is a vehicle used to get somewhere."

We are indeed often people of little faith. I find that my faith is most challenged not by the question of who God is or where Jesus is or even if he can do miraculous things, but rather I tend to most question the work I've been given to do, or the place I've been asked to do it. When my faith is at its weakest, I question the boat I'm in, I fear that the forces around me are stronger than God, I may strike out on my own to a place that God hasn't called me to.

Bishop Frank Griswold, our former presiding bishop of blessed memory, called that "running ahead of God."

And that is usually followed with a very honest cry of "Save my Lord."

These stories remind me that my salvation may very well require my willingness to return to the boat that Jesus has placed me in, and expect with perfect faith that he will get in with me, and that wherever we are going, we will go there together.

Amen.

[3] See commentary by Mark V Hoffman on WorkingPreacher.org