

DO YOU STILL HAVE NO FAITH?

“Let us go over to the other side,” Jesus said to his disciples.

At any time in your life, did you ever hear Jesus calling, inviting you to take some kind of a leap of faith; to metaphorically hop in the boat with him and go on a journey to the other side—wherever the “other side” happened to be?

If so, did you get in the boat with him?

Jesus’ is constantly inviting us to travel with him. He does it all the time. Our Lord is always and ever calling us, his disciples, to take a voyage with him somewhere across the sea of our lives, perhaps to an unfamiliar destination that’s completely different from the place in life we’re presently at.

At first, it sounds like a pretty cool thing. We think, this is going to be interesting and exciting. I mean, who doesn’t want to go on a journey with Jesus? That’s what our Christian faith is all about: journeying with Jesus. It will be great to sail into the future with Christ helping us to navigate our lives, with the wind at our backs and the sunshine on our shoulders! With Jesus alongside us, what could possibly go wrong?

But now, let’s get real. If and when we choose to jump in the boat with Jesus and head off with him to the “other side,” to a place we don’t know and have never traveled to before, there are no guarantees that it’s going to be smooth sailing. Jesus didn’t promise his disciples that they weren’t going to run into rough waters on their journey to the other side of the Sea of Galilee; and neither does Jesus promise us that the voyage we take with him in our lives will be without storms and turbulence.

Jesus couldn’t and wouldn’t promise us that because, as we all know and are perfectly aware of, life just doesn’t work that way. In fact, oftentimes it’s exactly the opposite: life sends us one storm after another after another, and the bad weather pummels us until we just want to wave a white flag in surrender. Okay, okay, life, enough already! I can’t take any more of this torrential rain, the gale-force winds and the pounding waves. I’m about to go under. Please, just stop!

We may even cry out in fear or anger to Jesus, who’s supposed to be traveling with us and watching over us. “Wake up, Lord! Can’t you see what’s going on here? Don’t you care if we drown?”

We would all like to believe that, because we're in the boat with Jesus, it will always be calm seas and smooth sailing for us. No gale winds to contend with. No crashing waves threatening to sink us. No violently rocking vessel to make us sea sick. But we all know that's not realistic. Maybe that will be true in the life to come, but not in this mortal life. Wisdom and experience have taught us that, even though Jesus is with us, there's still going to be plenty of unsettled weather on the way.

Not everyone accepts that. I've lost count of the number of people I've counseled who were going through a very difficult stage in their life, and they expressed shock and fear and anger about what they were experiencing and said to me, in so many words, "I've been a good Christian all my life. So, why is God allowing this to happen to me? It's not fair! I don't deserve it!" And they're probably right. There's a good chance they don't deserve the storm that's causing them such upheaval.

But even though it may be unfair, bad weather happens in this life. To all of us. And often those storms happen out of the blue, randomly and unjustly, for no logical or acceptable reason. Some of the storms we face will be greater and more powerful than others. Some will be minor affairs that do little more than inconveniently mess up our hair from a stiff wind. Others will be dangerous and threatening. And sadly, some storms may end up being fatal to us or to a loved one.

I'm not trying to be gloomy, just realistic.

Whenever I read this story of Jesus silencing the storm and calming the waters, the thing that always stands out to me is the question our Lord asked his disciples: "Why are you so afraid?" Surely Jesus knew why. The disciples were afraid that they were going to drown. And they feared drowning because that meant they were going to die. In other words, Jesus' disciples feared death. Which means, when Jesus asked his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" he was actually asking, "Why are you afraid of death?"

"That's an interesting question. It's also a question that's rarely asked in our death-denying culture. We don't like to talk about death, never mind talk about why we're afraid of it. But there are very few people who aren't afraid of death, to some degree, at least. I think that's because death is the ultimate mystery.

I read somewhere, a long time ago, that human beings are the only living creatures that are able to contemplate their own death. We're the only creatures of God on earth who not only know that we're going to die, but we're able to imagine it and anticipate it before it happens. Sometimes that's a good

thing. Because having the ability to realize our mortality and foresee our own demise allows us to think ahead and plan for that eventuality. It inspires us to smell the roses and appreciate the beauty all around us during the limited time we do have on earth. And our limited time in this world moves us to put things in perspective, to not sweat the small stuff, and to love those around us like there's no tomorrow because maybe there won't be a tomorrow.

And, of course, as Christians we believe that death doesn't have the last word. Our faith declares that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead, and by believing in him we will be raised as well and receive Eternal Life. We trust in God and God's power over death, so we're able to say, along with the Apostle Paul, that "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" Even so, even with our faith to comfort and assure us, death is sad. It's painful. It robs us of loved ones and future hopes and dreams and plans. And it's inevitable. We can't avoid it, no matter how much we might want to.

I guess we could think of death as the metaphorical boat we will all be stepping into to take us to the "other side" of this earthly life, even if we're not sure exactly what's over there on that other side. All we can do is hold on tightly to the faith that has been growing and developing in us since childhood, and trust that Jesus will be there in the boat with us and will prevent us from plunging into eternal darkness and never be seen again.

A man named Merrill had been a pastor for twenty years, and he was a very good one. He had an extensive knowledge of the Old and New Testaments. He also conducted the two choirs of his church, counseled high school students and married couples, taught Sunday School, and served his congregation in many other ways.

One day, Merrill, who was fifty-seven, began to experience severe nausea and vomiting. Within a few days he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Visits to several specialists confirmed his worst fears—that neither surgery, radiation, nor chemotherapy would be of help. In other words, he was soon going to step into the boat with Jesus and head over to the other side of this life.

Remarkably, this didn't depress him in the least, but only emboldened him. He even reassured his wife and children that his illness and impending death were going to bring them closer—not separate or defeat them. Merrill was helpless before his disease, medically speaking. But he had a faith that was unshakeable. And he wrote this note to assure his family and friends.

"My future is uncertain. But I find joy in knowing that it is completely in God's hands. All I have to do is thank him. If I have not much longer to live, then that is God's will and it should mean something. My task is to find out

what it means. I have no complaints, only thanks! If it is God's pleasure to give me a chance to start over again, that's wonderful. If it is not God's pleasure and God has other tasks for me, I accept that. Faith doesn't depend on me having my way; faith depends on God having His way. This must be my highest joy and delight. Otherwise, how can I pray, 'Thy will be done?'

I think that's the kind of deep-rooted, unwavering faith Jesus was hoping his disciples would have when they were caught in a dangerous squall on the Sea of Galilee and it seemed as though all was lost. And when Jesus didn't find that kind of deep-rooted, trusting faith in his disciples, I think he was disappointed and heartbroken. And that's why he asked with sorrow, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"

A few of you know that this August, on my summer vacation, Penny and I are traveling to England to explore London and the English countryside. So now I'll actually have an interesting response when I'm asked—as I always am whenever I go on vacation—"What are you going to do during your time off? Are you going anywhere?" Well, this year I'm going to England! I'm looking forward to having tea with the Queen and see those famous double-decker buses that look so cool.

The only drawback to this trip to England, in my mind, is the traveling. We're going to be flying across the Atlantic Ocean to get there, and I'm not too keen on flying. I'm not sure why, but it may have something to do with being five miles up in the air, soaring over the clouds and not remaining under them as God probably intended human beings to do. I have flown before, and I know the old adage—which I'm sure is true—that we're safer flying in a jetliner than driving on the road. Even so, I consider myself a bit of a "white knuckle" flyer, although I can hide it pretty well.

The one thing that always makes my heart skip a beat when I'm flying is encountering some turbulence. Feeling the jetliner I'm flying on shimmy and shake is probably the closest I'll come to experiencing the kind of fear and dread the disciples must have felt when they were in their little boat in the midst of that powerful storm. Sometimes, while the plane is rocking and rolling and doing its high altitude dance, I'll try to distract myself by reading the "What to do in an Emergency" flier that's always in the holder on the back of the seat in front of you. Then I turn to the page that answers a question I really don't want to ask: "What to do if this jet plane lands in the water?" and I don't want to read anymore.

When I'm flying, turbulence makes me feel vulnerable. Very vulnerable. Turbulence reminds me that I'm mortal, I'm a finite human being, and that my fragile life could come to an abrupt and unexpected end any time.

Being a man of faith, I truly believe Jesus is right there in that jet plane with Penny and me and all the other passengers onboard it. Maybe he fell asleep in the seat behind me while watching the awful movie the airline chose for our eleven hour flight.

If we should hit some turbulence as we're flying to or from England, I know what I'll be thinking. Right after wondering if this is the end, and the First Congregational Church of Scarborough might have to look for a new minister to replace the former one, whose body was never found, I'll be whispering a silent prayer. It will begin, "Uh, Jesus? Are you there, Lord?"

And the worse the turbulence is, the more frantic my prayer is going to be. "Hey, Jesus! Wake up! This doesn't look good. Don't you care if we crash and we all die?" Until finally Jesus' eyes flutter open, he yawns, stretches out his arms and says, "Fred, why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"

To which I would have to respond, if the truth be told, that sometimes I have faith, yes. But at other times, when a storm hits my life and threatens to swamp my boat and sink it, or the plane I'm flying in hits strong turbulence and causes my stomach to lurch and my fears to rise, I confess that I don't always have faith. At least not as much faith as I'd like to have.

I'd like to do better. What about you? My prayer is that our faith may be so deep and strong that, whatever storms may come, even death, Jesus won't find reason to ask us, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" Amen.