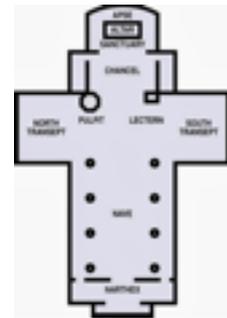


The Way — Calming the Storm

Luke 8:22-25//Mark 4:35-41
The 4th Sunday in Lent - March 6, 2016
The Rev. Dr. Ritva H. Williams

[SLIDE 18] I want to start this morning with a bit of a lesson on church architecture (thanks Mark Howland for planting this seed). What do you call this room that we are gathered in? The sanctuary. What does “sanctuary” mean? A sacred place. A safe haven.



Sanctuary means a sacred place or space especially the area around the altar in a temple or church. Traditionally this area of the church is set apart in some way, often with a railing. Access to this part of the church was, and in some churches is still restricted to priests and their attendants. In contemporary churches like ours, the altar area is raised but there is no railing and no one is restricted from approaching this sacred space. We all gather together around Christ’s table as the body of Christ emerging, becoming visible and active in this time and place. Christ’s presence in our midst makes the entire space and all of us who are gathered here holy.

In the ancient world, there were designated shrines and altars where persons who accidentally injured or killed someone, and those who were wrongfully accused, could seek asylum from vengeful relatives and persecuting authorities. This was such a well established practice in the ancient world that when barbarians were ransacking and pillaging the city of Rome in the 5th century, Christian churches opened their doors to anyone, Christian, Jew or pagan who was seeking safety especially women and children. The rampaging barbarians did not attack the churches. Over time Christians developed rules for who qualified for protection within churches, and how much protection could be offered. This is how the word sanctuary came to mean not only a sacred place but also a place of safety and refuge, a safe haven.

But let’s go back to that older, more traditional church plan for just a few minutes more ... the sanctuary is the area around the altar and is separated from where the people sit by the chancel. In the church of my youth, this is where the choir and organ were located. The area where the people sit is called the “nave.” It derives from the Latin word *navis* meaning ship. Have you ever noticed how the vaulted ceilings of churches often look like the inside of a ship’s keel? Even this contemporary worship space has a vaulted ceiling with the peak running from the doors to the altar. This is the nave of our church.



[STEPS 1 & 2] The image of the ship is an early and enduring symbol for the church. You can find it on stained glass windows and icons like this one ... [describe the icon] ... The image is meant to convey the idea that all those who are gathered in the ship of the church have embarked on a journey together. The destination of that journey is often described as the

kingdom of God, the world to come, paradise or heaven.

[STEP 3] The choice of the ship as a symbol for the church derives in part from today’s gospel lesson. I want to explore this text as a parable about discipleship and mission. Let me begin with a question:

Why do the disciples cross the lake?

If this was a chicken joke, we might answer, “They cross the lake to ... get to the other side.” If we remember our Sunday school lessons, we might answer, “They cross the lake because ... Jesus told them to.” Both answers are correct.



Our lesson begins with Jesus getting into a boat with his disciples and saying, “Let’s go across the lake to the other side.” They put out into the lake. As they are sailing, Jesus falls asleep. Suddenly a great windstorm sweeps across the lake, whipping up the waves so that the boat begins to take on water. The disciples wake Jesus up, shouting, “Master, Master, we are perishing.” In Mark’s version of this story, the disciples cry out, “Teacher don’t you care that we are perishing” (Mark 4:38). Given that four of the disciples were professional fishermen it must have been a pretty bad situation.

[STEP 4] Jesus gets up, rebukes the wind and the raging waves which immediately cease. Jesus turns to the disciples and asks, “Where is your faith?” We’re told that they were afraid and amazed, wondering “who is this?”



Our reading ends there. But what do you think happened next? Jesus and the disciples are in the boat and now it is dead calm, no more waves crashing into the boat, no more wind. What happens to a sailing vessel when there is no wind? It stalls. It goes nowhere. Fortunately the boats that ply the Sea of Galilee were also equipped with oars. So now the disciples take out the oars and begin to row the boat across the lake. Hard physical labor instead of flying before the wind.

It gets even better. They finally reach the other side of the lake, and no sooner does Jesus step out of the boat onto the land, when a naked demon-possessed man comes rushing out of a cemetery, throws himself at Jesus’ feet, screaming “don’t torment me.” Can you imagine the faces of those hot, sweaty disciples? Can you imagine what must have been going through their minds — “Dude! That’s the last boat trip we’re taking with you!

Let’s see if we can apply this text to our own lives and mission as disciples of Jesus. What might we learn about Jesus, ourselves, and our purpose as a community of faith?

(1) Jesus is in the boat with us from the start of the journey to its very end.

(2) Jesus says, “Let *us* go across to the other side of the lake.” Jesus is not sending us across to the other side of the lake on our own, but goes with us.

(3) Jesus is *the* calm, non-anxious presence in the boat. He fell asleep, probably because he was exhausted from a long day of teaching and healing. He continues to sleep through the storm. Is this a sign of his complete faith and trust in God to get him to the other side? Jesus does wake up when the disciples cry out in fear. He doesn’t respond to the wind and waves, but does respond to their distress, making the storm go away.

(4) The disciples’ fear comes out as an accusation, “don’t you care that we are perishing?” In their panic they assume the worst about Jesus. How does Jesus respond to their accusation? He simply calms the wind and the waves. This is good news for all of us: You don’t have to have perfect faith for God to love and care for you. You can even be paralyzed with fear, assume the worst and accuse God of not caring about you in the midst of life’s storms, and God will not abandon you and will still respond with grace and mercy.

(5) The point of the boat trip is to get to the other side of the lake where a naked, demon-possessed man living in a cemetery is in desperate need of Jesus’ healing touch. To reach that man in need we have to move from comfortable, familiar territory to the strange and foreign land across the lake. We have to grow and mature to become disciples caring for those Jesus loves. The journey involves both windstorms and crashing waves that overwhelm us with anxiety, fear and panic, and times of dead calm when we have to work hard, when we are called to ponder Christ’s question: Where is your faith?

(6) Is this a sanctuary or a nave? Are we called to be a safe haven or a ship crossing to the other side of the lake? Are we called to be a community of safety and refuge for persons experiencing trouble and injustice in their lives? Are we called to be a ship sailing bravely across a stormy lake to reach out to those who are so desperately in need of Christ’s love and grace? Yes. Our strategic plan calls for us to be both sanctuary and ship sailing across to the other side.

Please pray with me:

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.