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Our Saviour/St. Stephen
Pentecost 11

Sisters and brothers in Christ, let us pray...May the words of my mouth and meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

So, sisters and brothers in Christ, whenever I read today's gospel passage...

Whenever I peruse this story where Peter steps out of the boat, at Jesus' summoning...

Whenever I observe Peter starting to walk atop the Sea of Galilee, only to begin to sink shortly thereafter...

Whenever I read this story, I have to chuckle.

I have to chuckle, because I think to myself, "Well, of course, Peter was going to start sinking in the water. What did you expect? After all his name means 'rock.'"

The name Peter derives from the Greek word *petros*, meaning "rock."

In our day and age, to say something has "petrified," means that something has turned into rock.

Thus, Peter means "rock" or "Rocky," like Rocky Balboa. "Hey, Adrienne."

And what do rocks do in water? They sink.

So, yes, of course, Peter was going to sink when he began to walk on the water.

And that little bit of understanding—that little bit of insight into word meaning—creates just a hint of humor in this story.

Interestingly, of the four gospel writers, only Matthew contains this detail of the story.

All the gospel writers, except Luke, record Jesus walking on the water toward his disciples in a boat, but it is only Matthew who goes further to narrate the incident of Peter attempting to walk on the water.

Did Matthew receive a version of the story that was different from the others?

Did the other gospel writers have the same version of Matthew, but decided to remove the detail about Peter attempting to walk on the water?

Who knows?

I like to think that Matthew, Mark, and John, all had the similar version of the story, without the detail about Peter.

But, that Matthew added the bit about Peter.

Yes, I like to believe that seeing the humor for what it was, Matthew couldn't help himself?

Maybe Matthew was the kind of guy who was always cracking jokes at parties.

Can you just picture Peter at the wedding at Cana with a group of people gather around him, saying something like...

"Hey! Do you know why ants are less susceptible to illness than all the other creatures in creation?"

"No, Peter, why are ants are less susceptible to illness than all the other creatures in creation?"

"Because of their little 'ant'-i-bodies."

And Peter goes on to follow that up with the question, "Do you how to keep strips of bacon from curling when you are cooking them?"

"No, Peter, how do you keep strips of bacon from curling when you are cooking them?"

"Take away their little brooms."

Get it. The Olympic sport...curling. How do you keep strips of bacon from curling? Take away their little brooms.

Anyway...I like to imagine Matthew a bit of a jokester, and I can almost see him with this story of Jesus walking on water, thinking, you know, I could inject a little humor into this by having Peter walk out on the water, only he will sink because his name means "rock."

PAUSE

But, humor aside, this text from Matthew actually wants to convey a rather profound message.

But it is message that only makes sense if we understand what the boat symbolizes here in this story.

For you see, in early Christianity, the church came to be symbolized by a boat.

Why that was the case? Who knows?

It is probably one of those scenarios, “Which came first—the chicken or the egg?”

Did the church come to be symbolized by the boat first, and only afterwards do we have the gospel writers writing stories where the church is meant to be seen in the image of the boat, like our gospel reading today?

Or, did the stories come first, where Jesus is often seen with his disciples in a boat, or Jesus is seen as teaching from the boat, and only afterwards did the early Christians then start to equate the image of the boat with the church?

Who knows? Who knows which came first: the church or the stories.

Interestingly enough, we still equate the image of the boat with that of the church, as observed in certain terms we use to speak about specific aspects of the church structures.

This piece of furniture, for instance, from where pastors preach is called the “pulpit.”

And if we didn’t know, the pulpit is actually a term from nautical nomenclature.

The pulpit on a boat is an extension on the front of a craft where a person can stand and give guidance to the one steering the boat.

If you remember the movie *Jaws*, on the boat named “Orca,” Hooper tells Brody to go the end of the pulpit so that he (Hooper) can take a picture of the shark, using Brody in the foreground to give his picture scale.

Brody graciously declines. Actually not so graciously, although I won’t repeat his choice words.

And then, in another scene from *Jaws*, when the boat, when the Orca is chasing the shark, we see Quint at the end of the pulpit giving directions to Hooper who is steering the boat.

And, it is a perfect example of the purpose served by the pulpit—to be a place for one to give directions to the one steering the boat.

And thus, over time this (point to the pulpit) piece of furniture came to be known as the pulpit, no doubt because the assumption is that the preacher gives direction to the congregation, to help steer a faithful course for the church.

Other nautical language includes the term for where the congregation sits in church, which is called the nave.

That word, nave, comes from the Latin “navis,” meaning ship. It is also from where we get the words “navy” and “naval” and the like.

So, even today, we still think of the church as a sort of boat.

And, with this connection of boat and church in mind, we can unpack the meaning of this gospel text.

For what this text is saying is that outside the boat, outside the church, everything out there, outside these walls, could be described as “chaos.”

To be outside the church is to be subject to a world of chaos.

And so, what is up with Jesus walking on water?

I mean, besides being a pretty cool party trick. Peter tells the jokes, Jesus performs the party tricks. These two would have been a hoot at parties.

Indeed just imagine being at a pool party with Jesus?

Imagine guests pleading with Jesus, “Hey, Jesus. Jesus, do your thing. Walk on the water surface for us. Come on.”

But, there is more to Jesus walking on water than some amazing party trick.

No, what the gospel wants to tell us is that Jesus is more powerful than the chaos.

Think of the story of creation. What existed at the dawn of creation? There was a formless void, and there was darkness covering the deep, and there were waters.

In ancient Hebrew, the term is *tohu va bohu*.

Before God created, there was *tohu va bohu*.

There was chaos. There was darkness, wind, and waters.

And this description is the same as that which we find in our gospel passage.

The little boat in which the disciples found themselves was being battered by winds.

In the midst of the early morning darkness, the little craft is being tossed about on the waters. And it is chaos.

And then Jesus appears, coming toward the disciples, walking on the top of the water, as one who is control of chaos.

In other places in the gospel, Jesus stops the raging of the storm with a word, "Peace, be still." Jesus is in control of the chaos.

Here something different happens. The disciples get into the boat, and the wind cease, and the storm abates, so as to say, that to be within the church, within the boat, there is peace.

To be within the church is to be protected from the chaos without.

That is what this passage is wont to say, in no uncertain terms.

PAUSE

But we must qualify this. For early Christianity did not see the church as a building per se.

This text does not imply that we must take refuge from the chaos of the world in some physical structure.

No, I don't think this text is saying that we are to squirrel ourselves away from the world, only then can we be safe from the chaos.

In fact, Martin Luther was against monasteries and nunneries in part for this reason.

Even the Mother Abbess in *The Sound of Music* tells Maria that their abbey is not be used as an escape, as an escape from the world nor from one's troubles.

To the contrary, we are called to confront the world, to be in the world.

But here is the catch, and this is what is so radical, so mind-bending, so innovative within early Christianity.

And this is what the apostle Paul so powerfully brings home in his description of Christian life in his letters.

In short, we are NOT called to escape from the world, to abandon the world, to shut ourselves away from the world, but instead we are to understand that the safety of the boat in the midst of the ongoing chaos, the safety of the boat, is always around us.

PAUSE

You see, we like to delude ourselves into thinking that we can control life.

We like to believe that we can make our plans, schedule our time, prepare for our every day, prepare for our future.

We like to believe we can put safeguards into place, that we can account for every contingency.

We like to think we have control, but the truth of the matter is that we are all subject to the whims of chaos. We never really know what life will throw at us.

And so we really have little, if any control.

Except that we exist in God. Paul's term is "in Christ."

We are baptized into Christ, not in Christ's name only, but that we are literally transferred, transposed, translocated from outside Christ so as to be inside Christ. That is what Paul means when he speaks of being baptized in Christ.

It is to be baptized into Christ. And that is what is so absolutely radical—to be inside God.

But, if we think about it, that idea really shouldn't surprise us.

Afterall, each of us existed once inside the womb of our mothers.

The very body of our mother's prepared itself to receive us *in utero*.

The very body of our mother's made a livable a space for us inside our mother.

And we could also say that creation prepared a time and place to receive the human species.

The story of Creation talks about God creating earth and waters, plants and animals, seasons and time, and only then creating humans, as if all that came before was in preparation for humans to exist.

Science would say that the earth evolved over time until it was in a state for humans to evolve.

All of the progression of creation, or all of the evolution of the earth, either way, all of this world was made ready one could say for humans to come into existence.

Like a womb really for the human species. After all, is that not really what Creation is like, a protective womb, in which this world is protected, encased in a safe environment, with an atmospheric dome, like a womb?

Is not Creation a womb, protecting us from the chaos without, protecting us from the harmful radiation of the sun, protecting us from the oxygen deplete AND frigid temperatures AND 0-gravity of the vacuum of space?

We are protected in this womb we call "Mother Earth."

And so, extrapolating from the life-giving experience of a child *in utero*, it probably was not great leap for the apostle Paul to say that we exist in Christ. We are protected in Christ.

So it is not that we securely in a church building, but we live like securely in Christ wherever we are in the world.

So, we need not stay in this building, because we already live and move and have our being securely in Christ.

That was the radical revelation of early Christianity, and it is the same good news today.

The chaos is nothing to be afraid of with the knowledge that we exist now and always in Christ.

God made creation for us to exist. And when chaos ensues, and it will, of that we can be assure, be confident in knowing your life rests in Christ Jesus no matter what.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.