

Sermons at Saint Mark's

The Reverend Lucas Mix

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, August 7, 2011

I Kings 19:9-18; Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-33

Step out into Faith

What must it feel like to step out of the boat, onto the water?

What must have been going through Peter's mind in that moment?

How could he be so bold?

It's a fascinating story because Peter had the courage to start, and the faith to finish, and the rather doubtful bit in between. We too, live in that strange in-between time; most of us are past the assurance of baptism, still waiting for the joy of resurrection, and wondering whether we have the courage to get from here to there.

Peter, ever the enthusiast, was the first to recover from the shock of seeing Jesus. They thought he was a ghost, coming as he was on the surface of the water, in the middle of the storm. Somehow I've always imagined this scene taking place on a clear day, with calm water. Maybe I think flat water would be easier to walk on. I don't know. But this week, as I read about the wind and the waves, I thought of a choppy sea, with Jesus emerging out of the mists – low visibility and rolling swells – and Jesus there in the midst of it all – calm in the storm. Peter sees this apparition, recognizes his friend and teacher, and says, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." And Jesus says, "Come." So Peter steps out of the boat.

It all started with a relationship with a curious man from Galilee, this Jesus of Nazareth. That is faith – to know and to be known, to trust and to be trusted, to have a relationship. But faith was not enough. Peter also had hope that this Jesus who walked on water could bring him onto the water as well – hope that this relationship and this Jesus meant more than the wind and the waves.

Faith and hope brought courage and boldness to step out of the boat.

Faith and hope brought strength and power to walk on the water.

Faith and hope brought perseverance to persist in the face of failure – for Peter doubted, and in his doubt began to sink.

So Jesus reached out and hauled him to the surface again. It was love that saved him. Real, genuine love, that is more than my faith in God, but God's faith in me as well; a willingness to help and a willingness to be helped.

I don't know if Jesus carried him back to the boat, or if they walked together, but I wonder...

I want to turn to another brave soul, Elijah. Elijah the Tishbite was a prophet who had offended the Ahab, the King of Israel, and his wife, Jezebel. Jezebel and Ahab were advocating worship of Ba'al, while Elijah reminded them of Adonai, the God of Israel. So Elijah went into hiding, fearing he was the only one left who worshipped the Lord – fearing that he did not have the strength to stand up to the King and Queen. God called to Elijah and brought him to the holy mountain of Horeb. And there, Elijah met God.

Contrary to expectation, the ruler of heaven and earth was not to be found in an earthquake, or in a great wind, or in a raging fire. Elijah met God in silence, which is not to say that God can't be found in dramatic events, only to say that this time, God wasn't. God was in the silence. And in that silence, Elijah found the strength to return to Israel and set things right with God's help.

Each of us worry that we have not been given the right gifts for the job that needs to be done. We think that God needs someone more dramatic, someone more capable, or noteworthy, or eloquent, someone more miraculous. We're looking for the earthquake or the fire in

ourselves, when we should be listening for the silence.

Smarter, stronger, faster might be good for the Olympics, for the marathon or the 100 yard dash. Those 10 yards across the water... they call for something else. Today's lessons ask us to look inside ourselves and find out what gifts God has given us to use. Because you are the good news. You are the kingdom coming into the world. You are the image and likeness of the Creator.

We can be scared to evangelize because we're worried that we don't have the goods. We're not good enough, or we're not strong enough, or we don't know exactly the right thing to say. But we are good enough, and we are strong enough, and we do have exactly the right thing to say. We are the good news. God calls us to share God with the world, in and through ourselves. We are the spark of life, which is not overcome by the darkness. We are the body of Christ, broken and shared for the sake of the world. We are the kingdom coming into the world.

Two years ago, I moved to Tucson, to be the chaplain at the University of Arizona, and I, like most Episcopalians, was a little wary of evangelism. How do I know what people need? Who am I to tell them about God? And God is there anyway, right? So, do I really need to worry about saving people? On the other hand, I remember being a college student myself, pretty clearly. And it always bothered me that the loud and obnoxious Christians were so visible on campus and the more mainline Christians weren't. People have come to associate Christianity with bombast and judgment, because those are the Christians they see and hear. Because we're not out there. There was a great YouTube clip a couple years ago on Episco-ninjas – Episcopalians stealthily doing mission around the world. So I decided that I would sit on a hill in the middle of campus with a collar on and a sign that said: Spiritual Advice: 25¢.

It's been a great experience. I've learned much more about the students on campus and how they view faith. I've learned much more about myself and where the core of my own faith lies.

But most of all, I've learned that students are desperate to have real conversations about real issues with people who are willing to take them seriously.

And it's not just college students. I know people of all ages who just want someone to talk to, someone to engage with, someone who has answers, but also has the humility to know that the same answers don't work for everyone.

After two years, we have twenty to thirty people on the hill every Wednesday for three hours. People of all different faiths and philosophies. People who know it's a safe place to engage, to ask questions, and to hear different answers. I used to think evangelism was about sharing the truth; now I know it's about sharing myself – my faith – my relationship with God. It's about listening as well as talking. It's about being with in a meaningful way.

Wonderfully, one of my students, Joey, has taken up the same cause. He sits on the hill on Tuesday afternoons, with a sign that says "You're NOT going to hell." Now I'm not as confident as Joey that there is no Hell, but I am confident that Joey is a man of faith, and hope, and love.

I think he makes a wonderful representative of campus ministry, of the Episcopal Church, and of Christianity. Because at the end of the day, it's not what's written on a sign that makes a difference; it's what's written in our hearts. Joey was worried at first that he wouldn't know what to say. He's not even a religious studies major; he's an engineer. But he's discovered that people are more interested in him and in his own relationship with God and with the church, than they are in hearing some official line.

People on campus know us now – those crazy Episcopalians, who sit on the hill. I'm not sure if any of them will join the church, but many of them will consider it far more seriously than they would have if they hadn't met me or Joey. Hundreds of people know that Christianity means more than judgment and railing against people, ideas, and progress. The good news isn't dogma – it never was. The good news is Jesus Christ, who came into the world, who lives in us.

It's that same scary truth again; one I've mentioned before, both here and elsewhere. You are the body of Christ.

Through the water of baptism and through the common bread and cup, we are one body and one spirit, and in us God is pleased to dwell. Sharing the good news means sharing Jesus Christ – in us. I have no doubt that God can work in other ways. I have no doubt that God exists in every smallest particle of the world. But God chose us. God chose to be present in us. If you have doubts about evangelism, don't. Evangelism is about sharing the you that is the deepest truest you, and seeing the deepest truest self of people you meet.

I'm not saying it's easy. It's terribly hard to reach down deep inside yourself and share that. It's hard to be honest about how you feel about God. It's hard to admit to all the things you don't know. It can be even harder to be truly silent for others, as God was truly silent for Elijah.

I must confess that I am a hopeless academic. I overanalyze, and I think in terms of philosophy and proofs, books and papers and precedents. I'm also a geek about things like science fiction and comic books. But I've found that there's a group of people out there, who need to hear about God from me, because I'm the one who speaks God in a language they can understand. I'm not the classic Christian, or a stereotypical Christian, but to my great delight and even greater surprise, I am a zealous evangelist. And I never knew until I tried.

It was the same for Joey.

And I think it is the same for St. Mark's. It can be so easy to think of what a Cathedral might be, and ask why you are not it. You're just a big cement box, after all. Why can't you be bigger, richer, more traditional, more progressive...I don't know. Why can't you be more? But you are. You have *this* to share. You have your idiosyncrasies and eccentricities. You have an amazing compline that looks nothing like what you'd expect, and is all the more glorious for it. You have an unbelievable music program and a real connection to the community.

And once again, it isn't easy. Being the truest, fullest St. Mark's does not mean resting on your laurels, or just going with the flow. It means doing the hard work of being honest with one another, so that you can be honest with the world outside. It means digging deep to find what God is calling you to do, in the talents and challenges you have. It means stepping out of the boat.

We don't have to be what we want to be or what we expect to be. We have to be most fully what we were made to be. We are the good news. The Episcopal Church. Not dogmatic like the evangelicals; not exclusive like the Catholics. We live in the middle, in the muddy ground where expectations meet reality.

Is that the only way to be a Christian – probably not. Just as I am “just as I am”, Just as St. Mark's is “just as it is”, Just as the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion are as they are; So the whole church of God, past, present and future is the great body of Christ, the whole of the good news. And we can go about comparing ourselves to others, judging—and whether you judge yourself better or worse than others it doesn't really matter, because one is pride and the other despair. We are who we need to be, if only we can be silent long enough to figure it out.

We must be like Elijah. Go to the mountain and find God where God is, then have the courage to find God within ourselves and return to the “almost” impossible task we've been set. We must be like Peter, in love with God, with faith to see, hope to do, and the courage to see God working through us. Because this IS a stormy world. We are beset by terrors, natural and otherwise – political, economic, social, personal. God comes to us, not in the comfort of the boat, but on the waves. And we are afraid. But this same God is within us. Like calls to like and deep calls to deep. And we must step out onto the waves with nothing more than we've been given.

Paul says, “But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never

heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?"

The world is like this: people wandering the sea, some in boats and some not. And God is alive on the waters, in us. There are thousands of people out there – Millions – who are floundering and drowning. Not for want of Christianity (in the abstract), but for want of us (in the concrete). We are the body of Christ. They wait for us to reach out. We fear that help must come as a miracle – an earthquake or a wind or a fire, but it comes in silence with an outstretched hand, with faith (in them, in us),

with hope (for them and us), and with love.

Some days it feels as though the whole world is a storm, and the best we can do is huddle in whatever shelter we can find. But Jesus is not in the boat. He is on the water and the only way to overcome the elements is to walk to him. We must reach out in the fog and the mist and pull people up. Reach out your hand, and you will find Jesus pulling you up.

Step out in faith.