



## Choppy Waters

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Joseph G. Schaller  
The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost ~ August 9, 2020*

### 1 Kings 19:9-18

At Horeb, the mountain of God. Elijah went into a cave and spent the night. And the word of YHWH came to him: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Elijah replied, “I have been very zealous for YHWH God Omnipotent. The people of Israel have abandoned your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death by the sword. I am the only one left, and now they’re trying to kill me, too.”

God said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of YHWH, for YHWH is about to pass by.”

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountain apart and shattered the rocks by YHWH’s power—but YHWH was not in the whirlwind. After the wind there was an earthquake—but YHWH was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire—but YHWH was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

Then a voice said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” He replied, “Elijah replied, “I have been very zealous for YHWH God Omnipotent. The people of Israel have abandoned your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death by the sword. I am the only one left, and now they’re trying to kill me, too.” YHWH told Elijah, “Go back the way you came, to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael as ruler of Aram. Also anoint Jehu ben-Nimshi as ruler over Israel, and anoint Elisha ben-Shaphat, from Abel Meholah, to succeed you as prophet. Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. Yet I reserve 7,000 in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Ba’al and all whose mouths have not kissed his images.”

### Psalm 85:8-13

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| 8  | I will listen to what you are saying, *<br>for you are speaking peace to your faithful people<br>and to those who turn their hearts to you. | 11 | Truth shall spring up from the earth, *<br>and righteousness shall look down from heaven. |
| 9  | Truly, your salvation is very near to those who fear you, *<br>that your glory may dwell in our land.                                       | 12 | You, O God, will indeed grant prosperity, *<br>and our land will yield its increase.      |
| 10 | Mercy and truth have met together; *<br>righteousness and peace have kissed each other.   | 13 | Righteousness shall go before you, *<br>and peace shall be a pathway for your feet.       |

### Romans 10:5-15

Moses writes about the righteousness that comes from the Law: “Those who do these things will live by them.” But the righteousness that comes from faith says, “Don’t say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend to heaven?’”—that is, to bring Christ down—“or ‘Who will descend into the underworld?’”—that is, to bring Christ up from the dead. But what does it say?

“The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart.” This is the Word of faith. For if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Sovereign and believe in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead, you will be saved. Faith in the heart leads to being put right with God, confession on the lips to our deliverance.

Scripture says, “No one who believes in God will be put to shame.” Here there is no difference between Jew and Greek; all have the same Creator, rich in mercy toward those who call: “Everyone who calls on the name of the Most High will be saved.”

How then can they call on the One in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe in the One about whom they have not heard? And how can they hear if no one preaches to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As scripture says, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring the Good News!”

### Matthew 14:22-33

Jesus insisted that the disciples get into the boat and precede him to the other side. Having sent the crowds away, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray, remaining there alone as night fell. Meanwhile the boat, already a

thousand yards from shore, was being tossed about in the waves which had been raised by the fierce winds. At about three in the morning, Jesus came walking toward them on the lake. When the disciples saw Jesus walking on the water, they were terrified. "It is a ghost!" they said, and in their fear they began to cry out. Jesus hastened to reassure them: "Don't worry, it's me! Don't be afraid!" Peter spoke up and said, "If it is really you, tell me to come to you across the water." "Come!" Jesus said. So Peter got out of the boat and began to walk on the water toward Jesus. But when he saw how strong the wind was, he became frightened. He began to sink, and cried out, "Save me!" Jesus immediately stretched out his hand and caught Peter. "You have so little faith!" Jesus said to him. "Why did you doubt?" Once they had climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Those who were in the boat showed great reverence, declaring to Jesus, "You are indeed God's Own!"

Generally speaking, by this time of the summer, I find myself facing an overwhelming desire to simply escape. I'm tired of working! I'm tired of thinking! And this year in particular, I'm tired of Covid-19, politics, and especially worrying about all there is to worry about. So when I read about the disciples in a boat on a lake, my first association was to languid afternoons floating in a canoe or paddling a kayak—or, to be a bit more adventurous, whooshing along in a sailboat on the bay. I love being near or on the water, particularly when I can watch boats of all sorts come and go. But after I was done with my little fantasy, I realized that Peter and the others weren't exactly on vacation! Generally, when they were in a boat, they were working to make a living, or to gather food for themselves and their families. And this was no placid moonlight sail. In the middle of the night, a fierce storm descends, which happens to regularly near bodies of water. Staying in the boat is now about survival. To add to the drama, Jesus is sited walking on the water, and in their fear they assume he is a ghost. (Why wouldn't they?) Jesus seeks to reassure them, but Peter, doing what Peter does, decides to push the envelope. "If it is really you, tell me to come to you across the water." I'm reasonably certain that this had anything but a calming effect on his fishing companions, who were probably happy to see him get out of the boat.

Being crammed together in a small boat which is tossing on stormy waters seems to be about as good a metaphor to describe our current existence as anything. The question is, how can we deal with our fear?

Noting that our entire world is very much like a small boat in the cosmos, Buddhist monk and teacher *Thich Nhat Hanh*, as quoted in a recent Daily Meditation from Richard Rohr, spoke of what it takes to avoid a sense of panic in the face of danger, as based on his experience in Vietnam:

*I like to use the example of a small boat crossing the Gulf of Siam. In Vietnam, there are many people, called boat people, who leave the country in small boats. Often the boats are caught in rough seas or storms, the people may panic, and boats can sink. But if even one person aboard can remain calm, lucid, knowing what to do and what not to do, he or she can help the boat survive. His or her expression—face, voice—communicates clarity and calmness, and people have trust in that person. They will listen to what he or she says. One such person can save the lives of many.*

Clearly, as much as we would like to remain calm, there are many situations where we simply don't know what to do. But gathering a sense of calmness in the face of distress is certainly an act of faith, even if we feel we are "faking it" to some degree. Or, alternatively, we might turn toward the person who possesses certitude born of knowledge about what is needed at the moment. In the couple of boat stories presented in the Gospels, Jesus is the one who remains calm as the disciples are flailing about.

But what are we to make of Peter's decision to get out of the boat, after effectually daring Jesus: "If it's you, tell me to come to you! And he does pull it off for a little bit, until he succumbs to fear of the wind and the waves. Eventually, he does make it to Jesus.

Fear has a way of making us feel frozen and trapped. It also can make us feel impulsive and wanting to run away to a different place. But sometimes, the right thing to do is to just get out of the boat! I have told the story from my own experience of praying with this piece of scripture while trying to discern a major change in my life. For me, *getting out of the boat* meant leaving behind my commitment to a life which seemed in many ways perfect for me. Yet I couldn't quell the storm within which kept me restless and unhappy. Finally, as I imagined myself in place of Peter, I realized that I needed to get out of *my* boat and in the hope that I would still find Jesus ready to embrace me. And so, I did. It wasn't easy, but it was one of the best decisions I ever made.

Whether we feel tossed about in the wind and waves, or dead still in the water, we can often experience the greatest challenges we face as being beyond our control. Often, they are. But in or out of the boat, we cannot deny what we fear, and are almost always better off if we decide to face what makes us afraid. Yet life continues to present us with choices, albeit difficult choices which should be made with careful discernment. We might wish that God would simply tell us what we should do. But like Elijah, we may find that God is rarely direct and dramatic in revealing the course of our lives. But we can sometimes detect the *gentle whisper* within the fray which might orient us to our deeper selves and better lights. Beyond the storm, there is the peace of a new morning of divine mercy and truth.