

The Sea of Galilee is actually a freshwater lake, located in the Jordan Rift Valley, which runs north-south in the northeastern part of present-day Israel. It's 13 miles long and 8 miles across, and is fed primarily by the Jordan River, which flows in at its northern end and then out the southern end. Along with some natural springs.

The Galilee is the second lowest body of water in the world; the Dead Sea, which is saltwater, being the lowest. And when the winds rush down off the encircling mountains and hit its surface some 700 feet below sea level, the waves can reach 12 feet in height.

Back in 1986 when, after several years' drought, the lake's level was particularly low, two professional fishermen, brothers who also happened to be amateur archaeologists, discovered the remains of what came to be known as "the Jesus boat" buried in the mud on its northwestern shore. The 27-foot-long, 7-½ foot-wide, flat bottomed skeleton dates back to somewhere between 50 BCE and 50 CE. And though there is no evidence of a direct connection to Jesus or his disciples, it is an example of the type of boat used in the first century for fishing and transportation across the lake. Much like the one that was being battered by the waves (the Greek verb literally means "tortured", as in, continuing assaults causing suffering) in that wild, dangerous storm described in this morning's Gospel.

The disciples' struggle to get across the Sea of Galilee has, it seems, been going on for a while. It was the previous afternoon when, after feeding some five thousand men, plus the women and children there with them, Jesus sent the satisfied crowds on their way. And, at the same time, dispatched the twelve to go ahead across the lake, so that he could have some time and space to rest and pray.

So they've been on the water since last evening. Imagine what kind of shape they were in, after eight hours, at least, of fighting the wind and the waves. And then, as morning nears, they see this apparition coming toward the boat. Walking across the surface of the heaving water that was threatening, at any moment, to swallow them whole.

In Hebraic thought, the sea is all about chaos, and danger. It is about powers that are stronger, and darker, and deeper, than we are. Forces that can overwhelm us, even sink us. Places, and experiences that we fear will kill us. The sea is a very perilous place.

And by now, the disciples are really tired. And those waves are really high. Experienced as they may be (and we know they are; many of them have spent their working lives on this volatile lake), at this point, the worst is becoming a real possibility.

So, are you hearing any parallels between their situation and the one in which we are all finding ourselves today, nearly two thousand years later? We aren't trying to get across a wild and turbulent sea; we're trying to get through a global pandemic. We're doing what we've been told to do: trying to stay strong and keep rowing for longer than we

thought we'd have to. And yet, it seems, we are still somewhere in the middle of the lake.

It's not the first time we have had to make dangerous crossings. It's not the first time we have weathered powerful storms. It's not the first time we have battled illness and found our way back to health. But with the number of deaths continuing to rise, and the gusts of infection continuing to batter, for the first time, I think, for many, surviving this storm and making it through to safety on the other side isn't feeling like such a sure thing. The sky is sunny and clear out there, for sure; but this boat, this "same boat" that we're all in, is pitching and heaving on waves of personal crises, economic uncertainty and political tumult. Waves that feel like they just might overwhelm us.

And when our world is in such a fearful place, when the storm is that fierce, and when it's been going on that long, it is hard to believe that Jesus might appear, suddenly, in the middle of it. Particularly if we've been thinking more in terms of him being here with us, in the boat, to protect us! Like he was, earlier in Matthew's Gospel, in another storm on the sea of Galilee. Remember how he fell asleep on the cushions, and once the terrified disciples woke him up, he made the waves stop?

It's hard to imagine he is actually out there. Out there in the darkness. And the chaos. And the turmoil. No wonder the disciples' first reaction was fear, and disbelief. It couldn't possibly be Jesus. So why, in the name of all that is holy, did Peter want to go out there?

Well, some say Peter figures that if this is Jesus walking on the water, then he is demonstrating power that belongs only to God. God whose Spirit, at creation, moved over the forces of the deep and ordered them into the waters above and the waters below. This is Jesus proving to them all who he really is. And so of course bold, impulsive Peter is ready to jump in. If he can be out there with Jesus, if Jesus can make him walk on the water too, then Jesus' divinity will be beyond dispute.

"Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water". And for a moment, maybe just a few seconds, it seems he's okay. But when he stops focusing on Jesus, and remembers how dangerous it is, and how vulnerable he is, he begins to sink; whereupon Jesus has to rescue him and return him to the boat.

But another interpretation of Peter's impetuous act in stepping out of the relative safety of the boat and into the raging storm is articulated by Matt Skinner, a professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary, in a column he wrote for the Huffington Post in 2011.[i]

Skinner writes, "[Peter's] desire to join Jesus on the water expresses a desire for transcendence. He's not trying to be Jesus, he's trying to be with him...". With Jesus in that horrific storm. With him, out there, in the midst of the wind and the waves. Skinner goes on: "...history's most faithful people...knew that if God can be encountered

anywhere, God will be found in places where regular delineations and predictable endings don't apply...sometimes incredibly turbulent places..."

In other words, in places where we are being thrown this way and that. Places where the forces of chaos are spilling over their boundaries. Places where our boats, as carefully constructed as they are, as tested and reliable as we believe them to be, are not enough to keep us safe.

Friends, I'm pretty sure that I am not among history's most faithful people. But I can tell you, for sure, that more than once in my life, when I have been navigating a crossing that should have been smooth sailing, and squalls have suddenly and unexpectedly come up; when the waters have been rising, when the winds battering against the small craft that is the life that I have carefully constructed, and am counting on, has felt like a kind of torture; when I have felt like I was almost in free fall the way one can in times of crisis, it hasn't been by clinging to the presumed safety of my boat that I have found God.

It has been when I have been able to lean into the storm. When I have been able to, finally, face the darkness, without and within, and stepped out onto that heaving surface. Because the possibility of encountering the Holy One out there is worth the risk. Because it feels like I have no other choice. Because it seems like it is the only way that I am going to be able to come through the crisis. It is out there that I have found that hand.

Now, mind you, everything didn't suddenly get easier, and better. Notice that the wind and the waves don't stop when Peter steps out of the boat. They don't stop when he begins to sink. They don't even stop when Jesus grabs him. It is only after both of them are back in the boat, together, that Matthew tells us the wind ceased.

And what that means in terms of the turbulent and dangerous situation you and I are facing eventually resolving I couldn't say. I don't know, and neither do you. But what I believe this story is telling us, and what has been my experience as well, is that the midst of the storm is very much a place of encounter with the Holy One who walks on it. Who transcends it.

And that the response of faith is not to cling to the boat at all costs. It is rather to say, with Peter, "if you, God, are to be found in the places that scare me; the situations that overwhelm me; the crises where everything that makes me feel safe is rocking and rolling like those waves; if you are calling to me from those places, then I will go toward you, even there."

[1]

https://www.huffpost.com/entry/on-scripture-matthew-14-faith-within-chaos_b_916355?guccounter=1&guc_e_referrer=aHR0cDovL3d3dy50ZXh0d2Vlay5jb20vbXRsay9tYXR0MTRiLmh0bQ&guc_e_referrer_sig=AQ

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