

In the Same Boat
August 13, 2023: The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
The Rev. Nick Morris-Kliment
Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA



*May Your Word only be spoken; and may Your Word only be heard; in the name of Jesus Christ, the Living Word.
Amen.*

For a couple of hours this past Tuesday, it was not hard to imagine our little church to be like the boat in the Gospel this morning. As water came in there, and there, and over there, and then, as it gushed up from through drainage pipes in the basement and spread rapidly over the floor, as we watched the rain blow sideways and obscure the view of the parking lot across Highland Avenue, it felt a bit apocalyptic. Streets were being closed. CVS closed. Starbucks closed. Little did we know at that time that cars and dumpsters were inundated behind the Knights of Columbus building downtown. Other residents of Needham suffered serious damage—6 feet of water in their basements, and the like.

In the big picture, here in Christ Church, we were ok. We will have some significant bills to pay; hopefully, insurance will cover some of it. And we are blessed with some endowments which are a life preserver for moments like this. Our ministries continued; our most effected tenant, The Dance Studio, should be able to hold classes tomorrow.

Our Biblical ancestors in faith saw water as a force for chaos. God restrains the waters in Creation. The Flood illustrates the power of water. And Noah's Ark was the saving vessel. And so, the deluge, then and now, is also reminder of one of the earliest images of the Church. Expounded upon in the 1st Letter of Peter, and then given further currency by Tertullian, a theologian in North Africa late in the 2nd century, the Church as the ark of salvation became a popular metaphor for our mission.¹ It is an apt image for rescue from the spiritual forces of death and destruction, and for the promise of new life.

The torrent further reminds us of important vocabulary for Church architecture. Nave is the word assigned to the main part of a church's worship space, where the congregation sits. The word "nave" connects us back to the ark. The Latin word for ship is *navis*. The same root underlies our English word "navy." Depending on the church, the ceiling of the nave may even purposefully be constructed with ribs, to give the impression of the framing of a ship's hull.

And so, the church building that holds us, and the image of church as community of refuge from the forces of chaos, combine into a powerful, and comforting set of metaphors.

But there is more in this story. This is perhaps the prototypical miracle story from the Gospels about Jesus. That "so and so walks on water" has entered the English lexicon as hyperbole for someone who has astonishing powers to lead in impossible situations, to make a way out of no way, to turn hopeless situations into hopeful ones.

It is an implicit comparison to Jesus.

¹ <https://bishopserratelli.org/news/the-church-as-noahs-ark-gods-instrument-of-salvation>

In the Same Boat

August 13, 2023: The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

The Rev. Nick Morris-Kliment

Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA



But does the Gospel actually say that Jesus walked on water? Apparently, the Greek under the English phrase “he came walking toward them on the sea” can be translated a couple of ways. One is “over the sea” and the other is “toward the sea.” So, it is equally valid to say that Jesus “walked on water” toward the boat; and/or Jesus walked toward the boat to meet them in the surf and the waves.²

But does it matter? What is the point of the story? Is it that he walks like a water bug supported by the surface tension of the water? Or is it that he is there for his disciples in a time a great fear and anxiety?

It is a time of uncertainty and anxiety for the church. We are being buffeted about by the wind and waves of culture, of demographics, of cynicism, of the pressures of modern life. But here we are in the boat.

One of the interesting things about this story is that just previously in the narrative, the disciples had participated in the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, feeding 5,000 people. People had followed Jesus and the disciples around the lake. The time for the evening meal had passed. The disciples said to Jesus, “You should send them back into towns and villages for something to eat.” He responded, “Give them food to eat yourselves.” They said, “We only have five loaves and two fishes.” He said, “Bring them to me.” He ordered the crowds to sit on the grass. He took, blessed, broke, and gave the food to the disciples, who in turn gave it to the people.

The disciples had just played an indispensable, central role in the ministry of Jesus. Yet it seems that they have forgotten the things of which they are capable, through the power of Jesus.

Each Sunday as a community, we bring our anxieties as individuals and as a community into our boat, anxieties about our lives, about our Church, about the world. Each Sunday, we invite Jesus back into our boat. We invite him to help us to quell our fears, to give us courage, to empower us do our part to feed a hungry world, on his behalf, and in his name.

Amen.

² William Barclay, Matthew, vol II, p. 103