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Would you rather be lost, or swamped?

Personally speaking, I don't have much fear of being lost. I love the challenge of new places and relying on internal resources to figure things out – that's more fun than scary for me. Yet, like many of us, I find the image in Psalm 23 of the "Good Shepherd" reassuring. If we just stay obediently in line and follow, we'll be in safe places with abundant food and water and shelter, without any effort on our part. Sheep safely graze. Wouldn't it be nice to live a carefree life and just coast, trusting ourselves to the care of an omnipotent shepherd?

This is "Good Shepherd" Sunday, a familiar image of Jesus. Even during Jesus' lifetime though, the vocation of shepherd was no longer typical; it's an even more distant bucolic image for those of us in the 21st century. A warm fuzzy thought, but not much more.

Here's an interesting fact: the word "shepherd" occurs only ten times in the New Testament; the word "boat" occurs forty-seven times. Might we conclude that Jesus thought of his people less as "sheep" and more as "people on a boat?"

Back to the original question: personally I'm much more afraid of being swamped than being lost. Am I the only one who dreams of gigantic tidal waves, classic Jungian? Much as I love the water, my personal resources are more than challenged by the power of an angry sea.

For myself, instead of a shepherd, I'd rather rely on "Jesus, the Helmsman in the back of the boat." I looked hard for the best word in English: it's not quite right to say

“captain” or “skipper” or even “pilot.” “Helmsman” isn’t a user-friendly word, but it’s the one I need. What kind of spiritual leadership might “Jesus the Helmsman” inspire?

The Jesus movement started on the shores of Lake Galilee when Jesus chose his first few disciples from among fishermen plying their trade. These men knew a lot about boats, and in many of the gospel scenes they provide quick, effective transportation away from the gathered crowds and off to a quieter location. In the gospel of Luke, Jesus preaches FROM the boat to get a little distance from the crowds. In John’s gospel, Jesus reunites with the disciples after the Resurrection by directing their fishing efforts and cooking them breakfast.

In today’s story from Matthew, Jesus joins his disciples to cross the lake, to get some time and distance from the crowds who have been demanding healing. Jesus is so exhausted that he curls up in the back of the boat - where the rudder is, in the particular kind of Jesus boat common to that time – and sleeps.

There arises a terrible wind storm on the lake, something common in that particular geography. The Sea of Galilee is similar in width to Lake Champlain at its widest, but only about 1/10 of its length, surrounded by steep cliffs and prone to winds rushing to fill in the rising hot air. Surely the fishermen have faced such challenges before, but this time they all seem completely overwhelmed by it.

Maybe they have assumed that Jesus, healer and preacher extraordinaire, is some kind of magic talisman, or at the very least, the Good Shepherd who will lead them in safe paths. Jesus is woken up by their screaming: “Save us, Lord, don’t you care we are perishing?” Next thing he calls them out: “Why are you afraid, o you of little faith!” and only after that he calms the storm. (If you’re interested, check out the parallel story in Mark 4 in which Jesus stops the storm first, then criticizes their faith.)

You've probably heard this story before, and probably heard it interpreted as fact that Jesus is indeed the Lord of Sea and the Master of Nature. That's what we tend to conclude when we hear the disciples asking: "Who IS this guy, anyway?" We all like the idea that Jesus is still in charge, just as he was when a shepherd, as our protector on the seas. The disciples are terrified – in awe – because they realize their teacher, their companion, has divine powers.

Sebastien Junger's best-seller "The Perfect Storm" tells a compelling story of the power of storm versus the durability of boats. I have New England seafarers' blood in my veins: my grandmother's family came from outer Cape Cod, but my great-grandfather lost three brothers on fishing boats, and he broke with tradition and moved inland. In the story of the perfect storm, Junger says those who have expertise on the water know "there comes a point where physics takes over and sailors are helpless to do anything about it. If a boat heads into a wave that is higher than the boat is long, it will almost certainly "pitchpole," going end over end to its doom. Or, if a wave hits a boat from the side and if that wave is higher than the boat is wide, the boat will capsize, flipping upside down."

The Andrea Gail of Junger's story was 72-foot-long, and it encountered waves higher than that and pitchpoled, sinking to the bottom of the Atlantic. There are certain conditions in which human beings cannot keep a boat afloat, unless there is some sort of divine intervention.

This past week, I found myself using the metaphor of the "perfect storm" to describe the circumstances of this congregation in the past year: as in the book, three conditions come together to form a hurricane. Not all of you have seen it from the inside, but it looked like a perfect storm from my viewpoint. We had a crisis of employment, finding and maintaining appropriate staff to take on the substantial work of this urban church. We have also had a predicament in the lay structure of this church: since the suspension of one section of the bylaws, there has been floating

anxiety within the committee structure: Which committees are still functioning? Which have chairs? Who is doing the recruiting for these committees? Thirdly there is the concern of the bylaws themselves, and how we can/should bring them to reflect the realities of mainline church life in the 21st century, instead of continuing to reflect the corporate language and structure of the 1950's. Three pretty large issues forming a perfect storm. "Save us, Lord, don't you care we are perishing?"

I am exaggerating for effect, of course; I don't think we are in imminent danger of perishing. But we are struggling a lot more than many of you realize. Did you know for the past four months, we have had to juggle utility bills and payroll, in order to scrape by? Did you know no remaining endowment funds are unrestricted? Did you know we have been "down" by at least one, if not more, employees ever since I arrived last July?

So, how shall we keep this ship upright through the storm? Short of some truly divine intervention in the form of a miraculous increase in membership or stewardship, it's hard to imagine. BUT: not impossible.

Let me offer a different understanding of the miracle of Matthew's Gospel that might help us which I found in a sermon by David Henson:

We are like the disciples and we want God to create the saving miracle: Wake up, God! Stop sleeping when we need you most! Save us!

We have a child's belief that having divine power means God has the desire to control everything. So this story appears to be about Jesus controlling the storm.

Notice, though, that Jesus uses his power only reluctantly: showing off supernatural power over nature isn't what Jesus came to do among us. In fact, it's actually what he gave up to be human, the power he emptied himself of. This is not about Jesus

controlling the weather. It's really about our lack of believing that God is with us through the midst of all our storms, and even beyond. The miracle in this story is that Jesus was with the disciples in the helm of that water-logged and weather-beaten boat and was in the same terrible danger that they were.

God's power isn't in being in control. God's power is in being in covenant relationship with us, his creatures, in God's journeying with us fumbling human beings. God is about power with, not power over. It's about inviting us to build a kingdom of love, peace and justice in partnership with God.

I believe in this God who uses divine power reluctantly, this One who came to live with us by letting go of supernatural power thus setting us on a journey toward the kingdom of God. This is a destination not of miracles, but of embodying God's loving way in the midst of a dangerous and sometimes overpowering world. This is a God who seeks to teach us calmness and peace in the midst of terror. This is a faith that teaches us to seek what truly matters instead of worshipping the golden calf of security and long life.

In these choppy seas, what kind of leader do we want Jesus to be? What kind of a leader do we want in a minister? What kind of leader do we want to raise up from among ourselves to keep the boat on keel?

Do we want Jesus to be a Shepherd who is going to keep those in our own fold, those of us in the "in group," safe? Do we want Jesus to be a master of nature who will protect us at all costs by using superhuman power to bring us through the storm? Or do we want Jesus the Helmsman, the Pilot?

I have a different picture of what might have happened in that boat. What if disciples – the real fishermen plus a few landlubbers - were in such a panic during the sudden storm they forgot everything they knew about how to survive? What if Jesus, being in the stern, took hold of the rudder, got the four rowers to actively power the boat in the

direction he chose, made sure that someone lowered the sail, and managed to outlast the fierceness of the storm?

Being calm in the face of anxiety – being a non-anxious presence, we interims call it – can accomplish a lot. I believe in a God who can make a miracle through helping people to assess their own gifts and using their own considerable powers to get the boat to safe waters by working together. I believe God is at the helm. We are the sailors, the fishermen, and with God in the back of the boat with us, we will make it.