

STORMY CROSSINGS

"In your hands, O lord, we rest,
 In the cup of whose hands sailed an ark
 Rudderless and without mast.
 In your hands we rest,
 Who was to make of the aimless wandering of that ark
 A new beginning of the world.
 In your hands we rest,
 Ready and content this day." (Source unknown)

There has been a heavy sadness in our community during this last week. Kaelan Paton, who would have been a sophomore at Housatonic Valley Regional High School next fall, drowned in the raging waters of the Housatonic River on Tuesday. Kaelan's parents and their families have deep roots in this area. His mother, Catherine, has visited St. John's from time to time and is a regular participant in our drumming circle.

This tragedy has left many reeling. One of the daughters of our Sexton, Jorge, was a classmate of Kaelan's. She and Kaelan had exchanged happy summer greetings only an hour before he disappeared in the river. She and her friends are devastated by this loss. I have heard a number of testimonies to the goodness of this boy. It is hard to grasp how someone could be full of life one moment and gone the next.

We offer prayers of healing for the family and friends of Kaelan, especially those friends who were with him at the river, prayers also for the release from fear that accompanies deep grief, for the rescue workers and emergency crews, and for this community, whose small size strengthens our ties of love and compassion.

In circumstances such as these, we understand more fully the archetypal truth of Paul's metaphor of the body of Christ, how we are all members of the body, how deeply interconnected we are.

Kaelan was a good swimmer and comfortable with water. Apparently, he dove into the cauldron in order to help a friend in trouble. These friends were also members of one body.

Troubled waters.

In today's gospel from Mark, we find Jesus and his friends in a boat on very stormy seas. The wind is hammering their boat and the waves are beginning to swamp it. The disciples cannot swim and are scared to death that their boat will capsize or sink. Everything is out of control. Meanwhile, their teacher and leader is asleep on a cushion in the stern. Why is Jesus sleeping at a time like this? He appears to the

disciples to be indifferent. They wake him up and say to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" Can't you do something? Why are you leaving us alone right now? These cries reverberate through the ages and in so many crises. The lives of Jesus' disciples are already tempest-torn. They had left all that was familiar and dear and secure to follow Jesus. He has many enemies, so they do also. They do not understand him, yet they are magnetically drawn to him. They are in the metaphorical boat of unpredictable change and transformation but they have no idea what the next port of call is. When they see Jesus asleep in the stern, they are worried about their own safety but do not express alarm that his life also might be threatened. Swamping boats usually fill up in the stern first. Was Jesus indifferent to the fate of his friends? Is God particularly absent or especially present in times of fear, chaos and loss?

There are over 50 references to boats in the New Testament and only one or two references to rudders. Rudders are generally located in the stern of the boat and can be manipulated by hand (holding the tiller) or by ropes. Did the kind of boat Jesus and his disciples use have a rudder in the stern or some other means for steering the boat? I tried to find the answer to this question but came up empty. Perhaps you will help me.

Some years ago I participated in an Outward Bound program stationed in Hurricane Island, Maine. The boats we used were called "pulling boats". They have sails and long, heavy oars but no rudders. The rowers maneuver the boat by pulling harder on one side of the boat, like a rowboat except larger. The boats used in Jesus' time were similar in size and shape, between 25-30' long and seated about a dozen people.

What difference does it make in the gospel story whether or not there is a rudder? It matters because *if* Jesus is asleep in the stern and his job is to steer with the rudder, then he had a major responsibility with regards to the safety of his passengers. Is he "asleep" at the wheel? Should he be actually *doing* something to steer the boat in such a way as to reduce the peril and not be sleeping? Generally speaking, if you can manage to steer a boat directly into dangerously strong winds there is less danger to the craft and its crew. Conversely, if the wind and water are pounding the boat from the side there is a greater risk of swamping and capsizing. If there was a rudder on Jesus' boat, why didn't one of the disciples take charge? What inhibited them? The paralysis of fear? Lack of imagination? Passivity?

Today's gospel story gives us a lot to think about with respect to leadership and empowerment. Jesus frequently tries to get his disciples to do things on their own, but has little success. When confronted with a hungry multitude at the end of a long day, Jesus tells them to give the crowd something to eat. They complain, "How can we give them something to eat? We hardly have anything." They only see scarcity. But when they obey and act on his instructions their fear abates. There is more than enough food. Actually, there is bounty.

It may be simpler to imagine that there was no rudder on Jesus' boat and that the disciples were alarmed not because he was not doing his job but because their lives were at risk and he seemed to be oblivious.

After they wake him up, Jesus reveals mastery over the elements by rebuking the wind and saying to the sea, "Peace, be still." The wind may represent the forces of

chaos and the wild sea reflects the near-hysteria of the disciples. In quieting the sea, he also calms their fears.

Mark wrote his gospel during a time of persecution. Christians knew what it was to be pounded by dangerous squalls. The frightening storm on the sea would have been an image that made real sense to them in their uncertain world. Like the disciples, they were probably afraid for their lives.

Jesus scolds his followers, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" In an instant their dread turns into awe and wonder, and their fear into trust. "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

How might the storms of the disciples been opportunities? Jesus seizes the "teaching moment". The disciples in the boat wake up and see a new dimension of Jesus and, we expect, realize again how much he loves them. How about our storms? White-knuckle fear may cancel out our faith, or it may invite an increase. Sometimes we just don't know what to do when we are fearful. We long for the stillness that comes from God.

On five occasions Mark uses the phrase, "crossing over" to describe Jesus crossing to the other side of the sea. On several of these occasions, he and his disciples land in Gentile territory, extending his mission beyond his own Jewish background and geography. In fact, the adrenaline-filled, hair-raising episode on the sea is followed by arrival on the other side at Gerasene, a Gentile territory. Here Jesus confronts and heals a man whose mind is racked by internal storms. Just as Jesus calms the wind and waves so also he brings peace to this tormented person.

There is an adventure in crossings even when the way is familiar. Crossing over water requires physical movement from one place to another. But there is more to it. There is also a sense of leaving one world behind, moving through another, and arriving at yet another. The passage may be fun or difficult, or both. In two accounts of crossings in Mark's gospel there are life-threatening tempests.

I recall ferry rides from Woods Hole, crossing Buzzard's Bay over to Martha's Vineyard or Nantucket. These journeys were exciting. I knew what we were leaving and I knew something awaited us on the other side. But the watery passage was always different. The sky, the weather, the sea and boat smells, the winds and waves, the light, the motion of the ferry ... all created a new drama with each crossing.

Jesus' crossings are always significant. I wonder if we see ourselves on some kind of crossing with its inherent risks, uncertainties and its possibilities for increasing our faith.

Who is in your boat with you?

I believe there is one in your boat and mine who is peace, stillness and rest, and who is ready to calm our fears and guide us to faith and joy in our crossings.