

## “Meeting God Out on the Big Lake”

August 13, 2017

A Sermon by the Rev. John C. R. Silbert at Trinity Presbyterian Church; Butler, Pennsylvania  
The Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

Text: “. . . *By this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning [Jesus] came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”*

*(Matthew 14:24-27, NRSV)*



Photo Credit: John C. R. Silbert, “A Few Moments Before Dawn”, Big Squam Lake, NH, August 2016

Our passages today are talking about rising and falling. I’m going to spend more time out on the lake with Jesus and the disciples than I am with Joseph in that cistern, wondering what’s next. Joseph is the one, of course, that is all dreams – his brothers looked on him with contempt (at a distance) “*Here comes that dreamer . . .*” Joseph had risen up, larger than life; he had eleven brothers before him, he was the twelfth. . . How did he gain such stature? Perhaps you have to fault Israel – aka his father, Jacob -- a little bit; Jacob is the one who gives Joseph that “coat of many colors”; a gift so distinctive that his eleven brothers can’t fail to notice the discrepancy. [NOTE: It is this story that comes down to us

through modern musical theatre as Andrew Lloyd Webber's *"Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat."*]

Of course the story continues after Joseph falls into the cistern – well, thrown down into it by his scheming brothers! Later, he is drawn up, raised up out of the pit only to be sold into slavery and sent down to Egypt. It is there in Egypt in a curious set of circumstances that he eventually rises up in position and stature to become a prince of Egypt and becomes the means of redemption for his eleven brothers who threw him in the pit! One notices the rising and falling imagery, by now.

That is an amazing story! Over this, we have to overlay God's providence at work! If we are only looking at the moment, we cannot see the through-line of God's activity as well; we have to trust that God is at work. . . Much like the wind and the waves against the ship create the rising and falling . . . "the deep, deep love – Oh where is God now?" And there he is walking across the water in the form of Jesus – "It's a ghost!" -- The disciples in the boat were shaking like leaves at the sight of him . . .

Wendell Berry, the poet, has a poem about rising and falling that is appropriate at this juncture. It is entitled "The Last Word":

"When I rise up  
let me rise up joyful  
like a bird.

When I fall  
let me fall without regret  
like a leaf."

Let us pray: Our Father and our God make us masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire, for we would see Jesus this morning, in his name and for his sake, we pray, Amen.

On the cover of today's sermon and bulletin for this week is a picture of the Silbert family canoe (It is actually named the "Kin'-oe") at its mooring as the early dawn makes its presence known on Big Squam Lake out beyond it. What one sees in this photo is only a small portion of this great lake in

central New Hampshire. Big Squam is the larger of two lakes, approximately 8 miles long by 5 miles wide, with islands and coves entire, making for an intricate and complex shoreline in all cardinal directions!

In addition to this family-owned canoe we rented a couple of others boats this year – a vacation time so quickly come and gone, the first full week of August! – My brother rented a beautiful 1962 Penn Yan wooden outboard – a boat that the marina hadn't been able to rent all summer because it was "too antique" for most people! It was a gorgeous boat, but was not fast or sleek enough for most folks . . . We rented a big pontoon boat for a day, as well, and all of us could climb aboard for various trips here and there. The boat did not discriminate who rode aboard: there were little kids, old folks, a new-born, young millennials – a whole bunch of folks crowded onboard!

One thing I had trouble with this year in a way I do not remember as a problem in the past was distinguishing between the red-topped and black-topped buoys out on the water – especially given the sun-glare of the day! Whew! Knowing the distinctions is important! Channel markers are another thing: a craft must pass between solid red and solid black markers as these mark safe passage through a channel. This is an international convention – red on the right, black on the left – "red-right-returning!"

. . . There was one year in particular when Elaine and I met God on the Big Lake (the genesis for the sermon title today). It was August of 2011; the summer we committed my mother's ashes to the waters off Church Island, there on Big Squam (after her death on Christmas Day 2010); her ashes joining those of our father's committed there in August of 2004. While we did so for mother, a bald eagle kept vigil watching our every move from a tall timber pine overhead. . . Bald eagles are rare on Squam, so to have one directly above us was unusual; that he stayed until the last of mother's ashes were strewn – some 15 minutes or so – before, then, lifting off and soaring away was spiritual.

We returned from the waterside committal service, pulling into the dock a little while later. As others got out of the boat and scampered away from what looked to be a breaking storm front, Elaine

and I huddled under the boat's canvass roof awaiting it. It was truly a whirlwind! It came from behind us and swirled in wondrous energy out onto lake in the precise direction from where we came – out beyond Church Island!

This was no ordinary storm front! This was something else entirely; like an enormous letting-go; a leave-taking of great substance; like the fanfare of departing royalty . . . It was supernatural . . . About that I have no doubt and we were caught up in it!

The story from Matthew 14 is not the first time the disciples had an encounter out on the Big Lake (of Galilee). In Matthew 8:23-27, they were out in the boat with Jesus as a storm broke upon them and the wind and the waves were fierce . . . Through it all, Jesus slept in the back of the boat! They had to awaken him to their plight!

Here, in this passage, they are alone in the boat; Jesus had sent them on ahead while he stayed ashore awhile longer. And now the wind was against them and the waves were battering them and then they saw Jesus walking on the water to them! It was supernatural! Beyond nature – "It is a ghost!" they cried in fear! (Put yourself in their sandals . . .)

But Jesus addresses them in their fear saying, "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid." Something is lost in translation from the Greek in what Jesus says here. He uses the phrase "Ego ei-me" [in Greek it looks like this: Έγώ εἰμι] which is best translated, "I AM."

Interestingly, this is the same phrase that the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible uses for God's name in the following passage from Exodus 3:13-14 (I have underlined it):

"But Moses said to God, 'If I come to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your ancestors has sent me to you", and they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them?' God said to Moses, 'I am who I am.' He said further, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "I am has sent me to you." "'

Jesus is more than simply identifying himself; he is linking himself in person, word, and deed to God Almighty, the Creator and Sustainer, Lord of wind and wave; the same one who had in an earlier journey on the lake had still both wind and wave.

The disciples, for their part, worshipped Jesus after he got into the boat and the wind ceased, and Peter, though water-logged, was safely aboard (Matthew 14:32-33). This is one of a couple of places in Matthew's story of the public ministry of Jesus where the disciples worship him and in each case there are those who express doubt (see Matthew 28:16-17).

Enter Peter, the impetuous one, who is not content with Jesus' own words of identification to him and the others in the boat . . . "Ei su ei", he says in the Greek text – "If it is you" – "command me to come to you on the water . . ." This, too, is a curiosity of the text in Greek for it is the same language used by challengers to Jesus: Satan says this to him in Matthew 4:3 and 6; the High Priest says this to him in Matthew 26:63 and the criminal who hangs beside him at Calvary, mocking him says the same thing in Matthew 27:40. . . "If it is you . . . (prove it!)" It is a testing kind of a phrase and Peter uses it: if it is really you, command me to come be with you!

The thing is, none of us – even Peter – is meant to walk on water and you know why? We will sink every time . . . we look at this story and think to ourselves, "*Well, if only Peter had had enough faith, he could have really walked on water . . .*" But that really isn't the point – the point is Jesus can! Because he is God! – EGO EIMI! – And we're not; but that's alright because he is present with us – "Ego eimi" – Present, Active, Indicative – a verb of present presence – in us, to us, through us, with us in all circumstances of life – even if we are in the little boat out on the Big Lake.

It is okay to doubt, but I don't think it is okay to test God. "If it is you, God, take away this cancer." "If it is you, God, fix this financial crisis I'm in." "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread . . ." Is there much of a difference? And somehow if he doesn't, he's failed?

God promises his presence. Let's not test God; let us let God be God for us. We can doubt, but don't test him.

Let me say this about meeting God out on the Big Lake in closing: the ship is a great metaphor for the church. Mark Hoffman of Lutheran theological Seminary says this about it in words about this passage from Matthew 14:

*"We should note that in . . . our text at hand, Jesus ends up in the boat with the disciples. A ship was one of the earliest symbols for Christianity, and this story indicates why it was attractive: when surrounded by adversity, safety and salvation are experienced in the church with Jesus in its midst. But remember that a ship is not a static symbol. It is a vehicle used to get somewhere. Ultimately, we may ask, 'Why did Jesus and the disciples cross the sea?' . . . They wanted to get to the other side to minister to those people there. So, leave walking on water to Jesus. That ship which is the church is where we want to be, and it can provide the way for us to get to other places, so that disciples of the Son of God can be moving [everywhere]!"<sup>i</sup>*

As the Ark was a safe refuge from the deluge of the flood for faithful Noah and his family – a ship of safety in the time of storm – so the Nave of this church – Nave is the Latin word for "Ship" – is an ark of refuge for the faithful in their service to God upon the watery chaos of the world. And God comes to us in those turgid waters saying "Take courage, EGO EIMI, do not be afraid."

When we meet God out in the Big Lake, thank God we're in a boat; and the boat is the Church; and the Church is in the watery midst of the world seeking God's gracious presence with it wherever it is called to go and be present in that world for him!

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Mark G. Vitalis Hoffman, Associate Professor of biblical Studies, Lutheran Theological Seminary, Gettysburg, PA in commentary on Matthew 14:22-33.