

## Sermon for April 10, 2016 "We're in the Boat"

John 21:1-19

It was not long after the resurrection. Jesus' disciples were sitting around probably still in a daze from Easter Sunday and the appearances in the upper room. And Peter, the leader of the gang, up and said, "I'm going fishing." Now don't think that Peter was lazy. He had been a fisherman before he took up following Jesus. He was going back to work; returning to the business of daily living. There were mouths to feed and backs to cloth, no use just sitting around.

But fishing just wasn't the same as it was before Jesus. With every cast Jesus' word's "I will make you fish for people" kept coming back to him. He probably remembered the day he met Jesus. After a long day's night of fishing and catching nothing Jesus told him to cast his net again. When he did, he caught the catch of his life. In that moment of grace, Peter saw God revealed in Jesus and was convicted of his sin.

In the present he was once again having one of those nights. They had worked all night and caught no fish. And just about daybreak there was someone on the shore. "Boys, ya ain't caught nothin' have ya?" "No, what's it to ya?" "Throw your nets of the other side of the boat." For a moment Peter thought he had heard that voice and those words before, but he threw the net.

In a moment the nets were filled with fish; more than they could empty into the boat. Peter knew that voice! It was Jesus! He rushed to the shore and when he got there Jesus had prepared a breakfast for them. A good Jewish breakfast: lox and bagels. Well, roasted fish and bread.

As they were eating together Jesus said to Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me." Almost without a thought Peter said, "You know I do." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep." Then Jesus asked again, "Simon son of John, do you love me." This time there was a pain in Peter's heart. He remembered that awful night when he denied that he even knew Jesus. But Peter said, "Yes Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Tend my sheep." A third time Jesus asked, "Simon son of John, do you love me." This time the pain was almost unbearable. On the verge of tears Peter said, "Lord you know everything. You know that I love you." Again Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."

But he said more. He said, "You used to choose the direction that you would go, but now it will be chosen for you." Then Jesus said, "Follow me." And in that moment all the guilt and regret, all the pain and the hurt that Jesus had brought to the surface with his questions just fell away. And this time Peter knew he could follow Jesus to the cross.

I can relate to Peter. As Christians, we can all relate to Peter. He was the chief apostle whom God used to lead the early church through its earliest days. But, as this story demonstrates, Peter was just a man in need of the forgiving grace of God. A forgiveness that he experienced through Christ.

As members of that particular branch of the Christian family called Methodist, we have other moving stories in our heritage that resonate with Peter's story. I know you have all heard of John & Charles Wesley. John and Charles Wesley were sons of an Anglican priest in the early 1700's in England.

While preparing to serve as priests themselves they became very involved in the never ending pursuit of holy living. They would rise early in the morning, 4:00, to study the Bible and pray. They would fast regularly and pray every hour on the hour and keep prayer diaries. They fed the hungry and counseled condemned prisoners. This was the period when the term "Methodist" was first coined. It was a term of derision used by their enemies. It was meant to make fun of their methodical approach to Bible study and the Christian life.

As part of his religious fervor to live a holy life John Wesley went to Georgia as a missionary to the Native Americans. On the boat ride over the ship was caught in a storm. It just so happened that a group of Moravians were on the boat as well and they were singing hymns in the midst of the storm. Their peace and tranquility in the face of possible death amazed John Wesley. With all his prayer, Bible study, and good deeds he was terrified. These Moravians had a faith that intrigued Wesley.

Georgia was a disaster for John Wesley. He didn't lead any Native Americans to Christ; in fact he barely had a chance to minister to them. John left the New World just one step ahead of the law. On his way back he was once again in the company of Moravians. In one of his discussions with them one asked him, "Do you know that Christ died for you?" John said, "I know that he died for the sins of the world." The Moravian said, "But do you know that he died for you?"

Upon returning to England John Wesley began worshipping with the Moravians. On May 24th, 1738 while in a meeting, on Aldersgate St., something happened to John. John wrote, "I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death." In a moment of Jesus' amazing grace, all the doubt and regret of the past fell away. No longer did John have to work so hard to make himself holy and earn God's love. In a moment he knew that Jesus had died for him and that freed him. It freed him to continue to minister to the poor and needy; to continue to study the Bible and pray, but out of the joy of his salvation not an attempt to save himself.

In both these stories Jesus encounters a Christian leader and in a moment of grace gives them the forgiveness and the faith they need to serve God. And in both these stories boats play a prominent role. That is especially significant in the Peter story. In the Bible a boat, especially one with disciples in it, is a symbol of the church. As the church we are adrift in time between Jesus' first coming and the shore of his second coming. And as in both Peter's and Wesley's case, Jesus encounters his children while they are adrift.

In those moments of grace when God encounters us in the boat, we are healed and given the faith to make it through the trials ahead. As a result the storm is stilled and we can continue to pray and study in peace. As a result we are given the faith to take up a cross and follow where Jesus leads us.

We are in a boat. It is the IHS Aldersgate. It set sail in 1960 for the shores of eternity. And many sailors for Christ have fished from its decks. And the storms of the years have tossed it about.

We as a church can learn much from these two boat stories. For one, we can learn that in the midst of life's trials Jesus is there to help us. As Peter and the other disciples were trying to learn what it means to keep living, Jesus was there to help them. To give them direction: "Throw your nets on the right side." Feed them when they were hungry. To offer forgiveness: "Peter do you love me?" To give them a mission: "Feed the Sheep." When John and Charles Wesley were struggling to know what it means to be God's holy people, Jesus was there. When John was scared for his life, Jesus was there in the praise of the Moravians. When he had failed in Georgia, God was there in the counsel of Christian friends. When he had failed to make himself holy with all his wonderful works of piety and charity, Jesus was there offering him a warmed heart as a gift.

In the midst of our trials Jesus is with Aldersgate UMC. As we struggle as a congregation to live out the Gospel, God is with us. As we yearn to reach out to the community, Jesus is here to give guidance. As we try to be faithful to our calling to bear one another's burdens, Jesus is there to give aid. As we try to love and understand our neighbors in a society that would rather blame and condemn than understand, Jesus is here to give perseverance. As we try to reach our community with the love and grace of God, Jesus is here to offer guidance. As we face the failures and sins of our past, both individual and as a congregation, Jesus is here to offer grace. God is with us because we are in a boat that is registered under the flag of Jesus Christ.

We are in a boat that is tossed about by the waves of this world. We are trying to navigate to a distant shore that we cannot yet see. And all the while we are trying to rescue others who are drowning in a sea of sin and attending to the wounds of our own. Sometimes it seems hopeless.

If there is one thing that the lessons of the past should teach us, it is that we are not alone. The Church including this church does not survive because of our strength. It has survived because of the one who strengthens us. "Greater is he that is in me than he that is in the world"(1 John 4:4). We are in the boat, and that "we" includes Jesus.