

The Radical Rabbi Who Slept on the Job

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



Prayer of Illumination

Startle us, O God, with your truth
and open our hearts and our minds to your wondrous love.
Speak your word to us;
silence in us any voice but your own
and be with us now as we turn our attention,
our minds and our hearts, to you,
in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Background

"Don't rock the boat!"

How many times have you heard that?

“Don’t rock the boat” means: don’t upset the apple cart, keep the peace, don’t stir things up. In other words, keep it the same and keep it safe. Keep people happy and worship the status quo.

Jesus wasn’t too concerned about the “rocked” boat. He regularly offended people—ticking off those in high places. He didn’t hang out with the right people. He talked with a Samaritan woman alone when you weren’t supposed to do that. Jesus spit in public when he healed the blind man.

In our passage today, Jesus’ disciples were offended. I mean how could their beloved Teacher sleep in heavenly peace on his little cushion in the stern, while they were going shipwreck??!! But the Rabbi was teaching them...even in his sleep. Jesus could rest because he was trusting, not fearing—

as the reed basket saved baby Moses in the Nile...
as the ark saved Noah from the floodwaters...
as the whale saved Jonah from the waves...

Jesus himself IS the “saving vessel” for the sea of humanity.

“Jesus, Savior, pilot me over life’s tempestuous sea.”

You see, it’s not so much in the Sea of Tranquility that we experience Jesus’ life-saving power as in the troubled waters and the storms—when we know we’re a goner left to our own devices. It’s in the baptismal waters that we go down into the abyss—dying to ourselves in the deep, and from there, Jesus lifts us up and rescues us from the waters, reborn into new life in our Lord!

Let’s set the stage before our Scripture reading:

More than any other gospel, Mark emphasizes the disciples’ misunderstanding of Jesus. They still haven’t quite connected the dots between Jesus’ words and Jesus’ deeds.



Jesus had been teaching parables all day long in the boat on the Sea of Galilee. A number of Jesus’ disciples were fishermen and they lived in the region of Capernaum by the Sea of Galilee. This freshwater lake was surrounded by mountains on all sides, so storms could suddenly come out of

nowhere and stop just as suddenly. But that didn't deter Jesus. "Come with me," says Jesus, "to the other side of the lake."

Now, to the Hebrew mind, the sea symbolized chaos, evil, and disorder. The Savior was summoning his disciples to cross through this. And so this sinister storm seemed to be keeping Jesus and his disciples from "crossing to the other side of the lake." But Jesus would show the disciples who was boss by giving them a glimpse of who he was right in the middle of the squall:

He was not just a carpenter from Nazareth, not just a teacher of parables, but Lord of all

— who even wind and wave obeyed.

So let's hear now this sea story from:

Scripture: Mark 4:35-41 (NRSV)

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – The Radical Rabbi Who Slept on the Job

"Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

Jesus is Lord of the waters. Lord of the wind and the wave. Lord of the storm.

"... yesterday, today, and forever."

The weather obeys him. The seas subside for him.

Who does this remind you of?

Who parted the sea so Israel could cross on dry land? Who did that? Who provided a whale to save a drowning man and spit him out on dry land to preach? Whose very word separated the waters to create dry land on earth's first days?

What can be said of God... can equally be said of Jesus. The Son of God is Lord. Yet at the same time, we see the humanity of Jesus here. The Son of Man needed rest—he had been teaching in the sun all day long. Jesus slept and Jesus wept. Jesus experienced hunger and thirst. We can relate with this Lord too. But Jesus never tells us he will quell every storm in life.

Sometimes it feels like Jesus is sleeping, totally oblivious to our personal or national crisis.

Wake up Jesus! You're sleeping on the job!
Are we not important to you?
Are you going to let us drown in uncertainty and despair?

But he is here with us in the boat. There's nothing to fear in this rocking boat.

We need to be honest with ourselves: sometimes the boat does sink. Maybe you're drowning in debt right now. Or struggling with addiction and you've hit rock bottom. Or you've got a sinking feeling about that test result you're awaiting. This is part and parcel of our human existence. We're all in the same boat. But even then, when months later you're still on that three-hour tour, and you think the news just can't get any crazier, and it does, Jesus is right there treading water with us, holding up our head, saying to us today, "Peace, be still."

And if you weren't able to stay afloat, and you're shipwrecked, Jesus will go down to the depths with us, and bring back treasure from the sunken wreckage.

Earlier in Mark, Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, and said, "peace be still" to the tormented man. Here Jesus says the same words, rebuking now the wind and waves saying, "peace be still" to the waters. The Greek word for "still" is literally "be muzzled."

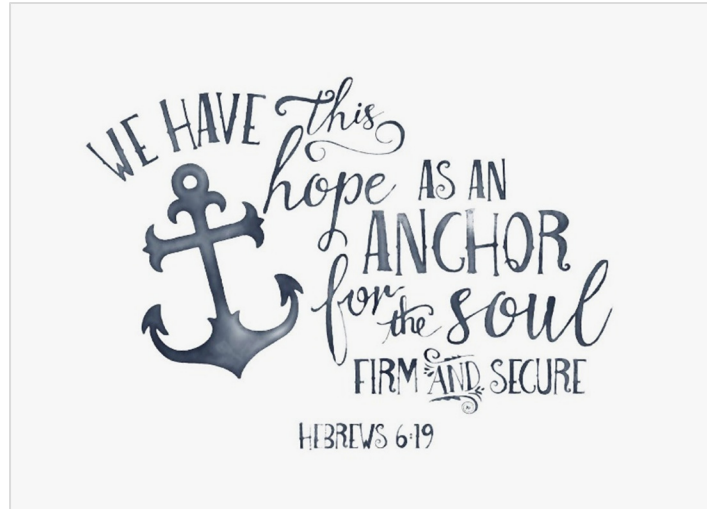
One of the oldest metaphors for the Church is a boat. You'll find this image throughout the early church. And where is a boat meant to be?

On dry land?
In the harbor?

No, the boat is meant to be out in the middle of the sea! It's kind of like we're all in the ark right now, and it's been a lot longer than forty days and forty nights! The rains continue and we're in uncharted waters right now Immanuel, but the good news is that Jesus is in the boat with us.

To be a follower of Jesus means together we ride the waves, we're riders on the storm. The key for us is to stay close to Christ—whether he's sleeping next to us or walking on the waters. To voyage with Jesus is to voyage in peace—even when there are choppy waters, rough patches, and perfect storms.

A church without Jesus in it is a dangerous place. A Christian without Jesus is in a perilous position. But a church with Jesus in it, come hell or high water, is going to make it through, one way or another.



Another image for the church is an anchor. An anchor doesn't just keep you in the same place. The anchor can also be used to move you forward when a storm is raging—it's called kedging. When you kedge, you throw the anchor out in front of the boat, then you pull the rope, so the boat can move forward and escape crashing on the shore. Kedging is not hedging.

Jesus is an anchor for us. Always steady and sure even when we are not... he pulls us forward during the storms of life, always leading us into peace and new places, even when the winds are ripping and the waves are crashing against us. Jesus' peace is a peace within. He gives us a great calm when we're going through a great storm.

With Jesus beside us and within us and among us, we're always sure to survive every turbulence.

So the question today is,

Do you know that Jesus is in the boat?

Or maybe, as St. Augustine once preached,

Do you need to awaken the sleeping Christ in you?

The good news is... Jesus is never missing, never lost at sea! Sometimes we miss him, but he's not missing! Sometimes, we fail to see him, or recognize him. Sometimes, we ignore him, or deny him, or discard him! But look behind you... look around you.... Jesus is right there... holding on... to YOU.

Jesus is here in the storms. We can even find rest with Jesus in the storm. As David says in the Psalms,

*"I will both lie down and sleep in peace,
for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety."*

We can have a deep, abiding trust in God, even in the storms. While the waves pummel our boat, Jesus asks us:

"Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

Choose faith over fear. Choose to revere the Rabbi rather than waver in the storm. The peace of God is stronger than the raging of the storm. Jesus beckons us—

"Let us cross over to the other side."

He will get us there. And he says to us—

"Quiet now, be still. Trust in me. I will bring you safe to shore."

Amen.

Image credits

"Christ on the Sea of Galilee" by Eugène Delacroix (1853)

"The Sea of Galilee is filled to overflowing as rainfall blesses Israel" CUFI.org/UK

"Hope is an Anchor Hebrews 6:19" by Melissa Dawn Baker Nguyen

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