

The Guy in the Back of the Boat

Luke 8:22-25

August 28, 2016

I have to confess to you, I am a little disoriented this morning talking to all of you. And that's because you are mostly grown-ups, and every morning of this past week, at this very hour,

I was talking to a room where the average age of my audience was about 6. It was Vacation Bible School week, as you've already heard, and my role in VBS week is to get up in front of the kids every morning, try to grab their attention, and then teach them a bible story.

Which, now that I think about it, isn't so very different than what I do up here – I'm try to grab *your* attention and then teach you a bible story.

Except that when there are small children involved, what I've discovered over the years is that there needs to be just a bit more involved than just standing in front of them talking.

Even you can probably find that pretty tedious – but a four year old? forget about it.

So, there are a couple key things I do.

First of all, there is always a puppet for me to talk to.

This week, for instance, I shared all my thoughts and feelings with a large red crab named Snappy,

brought to life by one of our 8th graders, Anna Patterson.

That's a start -- puppets grab the kids' attention, for sure, but then you gotta hold it.

And for that, I've discovered that nothing works better than the most basic element of comedy: falling down.

Just generally, looking like an idiot.

I find that this is not difficult for me, not difficult at all.

This week in front of the kids, among various other things, I lost control while on a skateboard, destroyed an ironing board by sitting on it (long story) -- and ended my week by falling off a surfboard. To be honest, not all of these events were intentional. But they worked.

I'll tell you what captures the kids' attention the *most*, though, and this is where I get to brag about the *teenagers* we have in this church. What the kids love at VBS is what happens after my opening shtick -- and that's when our youth counselors act out the Bible Story for the day. And they're awesome.

They put on Christmas pageant costumes, including those Bible-time headdresses, and get up there on the Memorial Room stage and bring a story to life. With feeling.

So our little guys get to learn a bible story, really learn it -- but even better than that, they get to see cool teenagers like they want to be someday teaching them about Jesus. And that's pretty amazing.

There's a reason this is our favorite week of the year.

On Thursday morning, the story you've already heard this morning was the story they acted out for us.

With a big blue drop cloth on stage as the Sea of Galilee, and a circle of chairs to make their imaginary boat, a group of teens in long robes swayed back and forth as they made us believe they were crossing the waters.

In the back of their boat, just like the story says, high school senior Connor Murray, our Jesus,

was snuggled up with a pillow, sleeping.

And snoring loudly for extra effect, I might add.

Then came the storm,

and the teens screamed with a mighty voice. A really mighty voice.

Juniors Sam Hawley and Ryan Eckert shook Jesus awake and hollered “wake up, Jesus, we’re going down!”

And Jesus/Connor rose calmly to his feet,

surveyed the storm on the Sea of Galilee,

stretched out his arms and said “Peace! Be Still!”

And as the imaginary waves turned into imaginary calm,

the teenage disciples turned to each other and said,

“who is this guy?” -- pretty much exactly what Jesus’ disciples way back when said.

Of all the many, many things I love about Vacation Bible School,

what I love the most is that for one week we are all immersed in the goodness and power of scripture stories,

and it’s not just the kids for whom those stories come alive.

Each year, the stories come alive for me again, too.

And this week, it was this particular story that really spoke to my heart.

There they were, those disciples, those friends of Jesus,

out on a sea that had turned stormy,

frightened to death, truly terrified; overwhelmed by the winds around them.

And they have no idea that with them is the one who has the power to calm the waves;

with them is the one who is the power to take away their fear.

And when Jesus calms the storm, and eases their fear,

they can’t believe it.

“Who then is this?” the scripture says. “Who is this guy?”

They had no idea.

They had no idea what he could do.

In the midst of their storm, in the midst of their terror,
they had no idea that right there with them was the One who give them peace.
The guy in the back of the boat.

A number of summers ago, on our Appalachia mission trip,
I was with a work crew that was on a project where a good bit of plumbing was
involved.

I'm not a plumber.

My fellow adult on the work site was a very nice person named Aaron, who, as life
unfolded, would in time become my stepson.

At that time, though, he was simply another non-plumber.

And the two of us, equally lacking in plumbing knowledge,
had to crawl under a house to do the pipes for a bathroom sink.

Hot and cold water going up, preferably to the right taps,
and the drain to take it all away.

This was not, in theory, that difficult a task to accomplish.

But it was for us.

We lay there in the dirt staring up at the underside of a bathroom floor,
bemused.

"How do you think we're supposed to attach this drainpipe?" we whispered -- we
didn't really want the kids on the crew to know how baffled we were.

And as time went by, we became increasingly panicked, we were going to be that
work crew

that left a family with no running water.

Plus, the plumbing glue we had spilled everywhere was giving us massive headaches
or worse.

And to top it off, the guy who lived next door, who was kind of nosy, kept poking his
head in and asking how we were doing, which of course just added to the anxiety.

We were struggling. *We need help*, muttered one of us,

and just then that neighbor guy stuck his head in *again* and asked how we were managing.

We may have answered a little grumpily.

And then he said this, miraculous words which I will never forget:

“Want me to take care of it for you?” he asked,

“After I left the coal mines, I became a plumber.”

“You’re a *plumber*,” we said.

“I just didn’t want to intrude,” he said.

Believe you me, we let him take care of it for us.

Now here’s the thing -- if we’d have known he was a plumber, we would have asked for help in a heartbeat.

But we had no idea who was there with us that day. No idea.

Same with the disciples,

way back when on that storm-tossed voyage across the Sea of Galilee.

They needed help.

They were overwhelmed, awash with fear.

And they had no idea that the guy in the back of the boat could still the storms.

Could calm the sea.

Could ease their fear and give them peace.

We have a huge advantage over those friends of Jesus long, long ago.

We have a huge advantage.

We know who’s with us.

We know what that guy in the back of the boat can do.

We know that with us is the one who can take care of things for us, the one who can bring peace to our worries,

who can ease our fears,

who can bring calm to our troubled waters.

We *know*.

We just tend to forget.

We forget.

There are storms in all of our lives,

there are moments when everything feels at sea,

and the deck moves beneath our feet, and there is no steadiness to be found.

They're different, of course, for each one of us, our storms at sea.

For one of us, it might be the tossing and turning of a decision that has to be made,

for another it might be the choice that's already been made.

For one of us the stormclouds might be what we face now,

and for others of us, it's the winds of the past that still seem to billow around us.

It's different for each one of us.

But what is the same for all of us,

is that each of us sometimes is shaken,

and each one of us sometimes is scared.

And all of us at some point are as panicked as those disciples on that windswept night in Galilee.

And we forget, we forget,

the guy in the back of the boat.

We forget that with us is One who has the power to still *our* storms.

We forget that the guy in the back of the boat

is there,

is able to bring us peace, to take care of it, to take care of us.

I am not saying that trusting in Jesus will make all trouble disappear;
that faith is some kind of inoculation from hardship.

You know that's not true, I know that's not true.

But what I am saying is that we are never alone,

that there is someone in the same boat with us
who, if we let him, can bring calm to our troubled hearts,
and peace to our fears.

To me, the miracle of this scripture story
is not that Jesus made the winds go away -
it's that he made his friends' *fear* go away.
That was all that really mattered to him.
And taking away our fears is *still* all that matters to him.

Two weeks ago, I preached you to the stories of this year's Olympics
that had touched my heart, and yours too.

I want to share one more,

the story of an athlete who never forgot who was in the boat with her.

In the midst of all our Michael Phelps mania,

and our excitement over the Final Five,

and wondering what exactly Ryan Lochte was up to,

in the middle of all that,

a rather remarkable event took place away from the spotlight.

An American woman named Helen Maroulis won the gold medal in women's
wrestling,

and she won by beating Saori Yoshida, a woman who had previously won 13 world
championships, and 3 gold medals.

For Helen Maroulis to win was, as one commentator put it, the equivalent of
someone upsetting Usain Bolt in the 100 meters.

So I watched the interview with her after her win,

because I was so blown away by what she'd done.

And then -- as it happened -- I was blown away by what she said.

She was talking about how difficult the training for the Olympics had been,
how much she had struggled in training camp.

But "my pastors told me," she said "Christ is in me, and therefore I am enough."
And so I just kept saying that to myself."

And so it was that right before her gold medal match, she said, in the moments where she was usually wracked with anxiety, she suddenly felt overwhelmed with a sense of joy.

She said: "I told my coach I just feel happy, and I can't wait to wrestle.

God gave me a peace that beyond all understanding;

I don't know where it came from, but I was really at peace today."

So did God give her the victory, did Jesus make her win gold?

I'm not saying that.

What I am saying is that in the midst of fear, Helen Maroulis remembered where to find her peace;

in the midst of self-doubt, she remembered she was not alone;

surrounded by anxiety, she suddenly found herself overwhelmed with joy.

And that's what any of us need from the guy in the back of the boat.

Helen Maroulis' story is her story.

Yours, each of ours is our own;

what we face, what we struggle with,

what troubles our waters.

But what's the same for each one of us

is who's in the boat with us.

What's the same for each one of us is that there's this guy,

this friend, this Savior in the back of the boat saying "Easy. I got this."

What's the same for each one of us is the voice that we hear saying

I am here, I am with you.

Do not fear.

I am your peace.

The boat will not founder, nor the storm last forever -- I got this.

Don't ever forget who's with you.

Don't ever forget the guy in the back of the boat.

Amen.