

Matthew 8:23-27  
Seismic Faith  
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2-9-20

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When I was in college, my roommate John decided one day that he was going to change majors. Maybe there's someone in the room today who's saying to themselves, "big deal, I changed majors like 3 times." It's not at all uncommon for young people 19, 20, 21 years old to change paths in these very formative years. But John's change of direction came after his first semester of his senior year at St Olaf College. John had spent three years as a biology major, preparing to apply for dental school upon graduation. And round about Thanksgiving we were talking late one night and he said, "Corn (that's what they used to call me), I think I'm going to switch majors to music."

At the time and as far as any of us knew this was about the most absurd decision we had ever heard. Not only for the way it would alter his course for the next few years, but John had also just gotten engaged to Kerry, his girlfriend, just a few weeks prior.

Now to our 21-year-old ears and brains, that were one semester from graduating this sounded entirely absurd. But that's because most of us were not accustomed to the notion of a call. There was a confidence and a certainty in John that we didn't understand at the time. He had uncommon calm in a very tense moment.

Jesus has issues an invitation, a call to each of us. But at one point or another the call to follow him will involve stepping away from the safety and security of dry land, and stepping into the boat.

To this point, following Jesus has meant some remarkable experiences for the disciples. Leaving their former occupations behind thus far has proved to be quite a riveting experience. Jesus led them to the mountain where he gave the greatest sermon ever recorded; from there the Jesus ethic and worldview was immediately given application when they encountered first a leper (the untouchable), then a centurion (the enemy); and from there Matthew says that many others who were oppressed with demons were released, and those who were sick were healed.

This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: "He took our illnesses and bore our diseases." It was signs and wonders! Who wouldn't want to be a part of something exciting like this?

Throughout the history of the church people have always been drawn to the manifestations of God's presence among the people. The Old Testament has a word for this, it's called the Shekinah, when the Glory of God comes to rest upon God's people in one place and time. It's so wonderful that you never want it to end. I can imagine at this point the disciples were so wide eyed at Jesus' words and miraculous healings that they're thinking to themselves, leaving our nets, our tax booths, our former lives was a no-brainer.

But then Jesus got into a boat.

Now at first glance we might think to ourselves, "that's nice, Jesus is going out for an afternoon cruise on the lake." But there's actually much more going on here than meets the eye. To give you a

sense of this let me give you a little bit of a physical and cultural geography lesson. You see first century Jews were not known for being water people. For ancient people water was not associated with recreation and leisure. Water was dangerous, it was chaotic, and totally unpredictable. What lurks beneath the water is the embodiment of all the things that we don't understand, can't see, and are unable to control. There is a very clear line of demarcation between the land (good, safe, known) and water (dangerous, unsafe, mysterious).

In Genesis 1 it says that when God created, the earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the waters. In Psalm 69, the psalmist tells of the fear of the waters rising around him and the floods sweeping over him. Beneath the water is where Isaiah, Job, and other Old Testament writers tell that Leviathan lives, the embodiment of evil danger. To the ancient Israelites, water meant uncertainty and chaos.

Physically, the Sea of Galilee was equally unpredictable. The Sea of Galilee, or Lake Tiberius as the Romans called it, is a lake fed by the Jordan river about 8 miles wide located just east of the western hills of Israel Palestine. The Jordan River continues south, flowing literally down to the Dead Sea, the lowest place on the earth's surface—making the Sea of Galilee the second lowest body of water on earth. Just 30 miles north is Mt Hermon which is 9,200 feet high, so what happens when the cold air from the mountains continually clashes with the warm air coming up from the Sea is that you get some wicked thunderstorms and squalls in the sea.

There is a really famous painting by the Dutch painter Rembrandt called *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee* and it's probably not that much of an exaggeration.

So, when Jesus asks them to step into the boat with him he's inviting them to follow him with their very lives. But the misconception we need to face as we follow Jesus is the notion that when we get into the boat that it will be a pleasure cruise of smooth sailing. When Jesus invited them to follow him off the land he's inviting them out into the place over which they had entirely no control. And as you would expect, a great storm arose on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by the waves.

Does it surprise you then to know that among the early church, one of the most commonly used images to represent the church was the image of a boat, with its mast and sail unfurled. Stepping into the boat with Jesus is a long-used metaphor for what it means to be a part of his Church. We are stepping off the dry land of security, of the life we've cultivated and created for ourselves, the life we're in control of, and we're getting into the boat/Church a thing that is the very literal embodiment of that over which we have very little control.

This week I have been doing a lot of reflecting about my life, and our life and how absolutely unthinkably confusing life can be and has been. I've also been in conversation with some of you this week who have stepped out into the boat, and are feeling the effects of life's waves beating against you. We thought life was going to go one way, we thought what we were getting into was one thing, we thought the person who was in our lives would be one way, but turned out to be another. The procedure we thought was going to bring about the resolution we hoped, took a dramatic turn sideways, and now life looks entirely different.

In the verses just before these today Jesus has a brief caveat with a few disciples who want to follow Jesus, they say Jesus, we'll follow wherever you go. But they sort of lay out the conditions, they

hedge a bit. And as a result they don't get to follow Jesus. But do we do this too. I'll follow you Jesus as long as my life follows this perfectly formed narrative. If I achieve and receive all the milestones of education, marriage, family, job security and satisfaction, and retirement. Under these conditions I'll follow you. But I've been around enough people who follow this prescribed narrative that when it goes sideways, they say things like: I don't know if I believe in God anymore. But what it was you believed in in the first place was a god of your own creation. We don't get to determine the conditions for which and in which we follow Jesus. He says get in the boat, and doing so may lead you where you don't want to go, it may take you directly into a storm.

In the boat as they pushed off and the storm begins to rage, the disciples saw him sleeping and woke him saying: We're going to die. And Jesus calmly wakes up and says "why are you afraid, O you of little faith." Interestingly, in the Greek little faith is one word. He says "why are you afraid, you littlefaiths?"

But Jesus can work with even our little faith, it's not where we want to be in the end, but it's enough for now. Even a little bit of faith in the hands of Jesus can match the squalls that we face. If you are willing to put even your little faith into his hands and trust your life to his leading, great things can happen.

Throughout chapter 8 we have seen that Jesus is one who has control over all things, he is Lord over Leprosy, Paralysis, demonic possession, and I am not kidding you can look this one up, it says that Jesus is Lord over in-laws. But in this passage we see that Jesus is literally Lord over creation. And when Matthew was thinking of what word he would use to describe this storm that they encountered he didn't just use any old word for a rainstorm. The word he used was the Greek word *seizmos*, mega storm. It's the one we use to get the word seismology the study of earth-shaking phenomena. And the only other place where this word is used in the New Testament is at the Resurrection when the earth shook and the stone rolled away. And what Matthew is communicating to us here is that Jesus is Lord over suffering and the cross, he is Lord over death and the tomb, and here Jesus is literally Lord over all of creation. The question is do you really believe that?

It's not always easy, but it is always good. I love the little anecdote pastor and writer Will Willimon tells when he was a Bishop in the Methodist Church in North Alabama. He was gathered with a large group where they had broken into smaller circles of people and the question they were responding to what do you love about being a Methodist? And as the people went around the circle answering the question they said things like "I just love the worship and music" or "I love being around such nice people." One person, interestingly, said "I love it because you don't really have to do anything." Interesting. I think the point they were circling had to do with grace, but ok. Then it came to an elderly woman who said: "I'm really glad y'all love being Christian's so much, because for me, since I joined this church Jesus has actually made my life extraordinarily difficult. You see, because of that woman over there 10 years ago I went on a mission trip to Guatemala. And now I've got pictures of these kids on my refrigerator that Jesus tells me are my family. Now wherever I go I'm constantly asking people for money for the orphanage. Give me the money, hand it over. One of them asked me the other day, why are you doing this. And I said, because I'm a Christian, you think this is easy."

When Jesus invites us to join him on the boat things are going to rock. Our worlds will be drawn out into the deep end where we can no longer touch, where we're no longer in control. Where it's not a matter of whether, but when the waves will crash.

I feel like we are in a time of tremendous chaos right now. It feels like our nation, and society, and our world are, in many ways, rudderless and we're just being tossed about to and fro. Maybe you know this feeling of having a seismic obstacle in front of you. But remember that the seismic storm is no match for the faith of a seismic savior who is Lord over suffering, who is Lord over death, and is Lord over all of creation itself. And in his hands, even your little faith is enough.

In just a moment we are going to be ministered to by someone who I know has seismic faith, and also someone who has been through a storm few of us can imagine. But Lori you are proof that the faithfulness of Jesus is enough to carry us all through the wind and the waves, even for we littlefaiths.