

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea.

I've been getting down to Lake Michigan a lot, lately. Really, what else is there to do that is enjoyable, safe, and free? When I sit and look out at our inland sea, I can't help but think about all the boats I see out on the waters. I see the sailboat and start to think about how nice it would be out there with the wind in my hair, far from illness and political freefall. Then I remember I cannot sail. I see the kayakers and wonder if that might be a nice way to go, and then I remember that kayaking is terrifying. I see a paddleboarder, but she looks more bored paddling than I looked while watching her. And then I watched a jet ski and concluded that while fun, I couldn't imagine it would maintain its luster week after week, year after year.

I thought back to my teen years and remembered that the only boat with which I have any familiarity, really, is the canoe. I've spent more time in a canoe than in probably any other kind of vessel, and it's the only one in which I would claim to know what I am doing.

The lakes of my canoeing years were miniscule compared to Mighty Lake Michigan. I paddled around lakes a person could walk around in an afternoon. You could certainly see the other side, and I don't remember any of them having waves. When I was about fifteen, my friend and I would sometimes put the canoe on our heads and walk the two or three miles from our house down to the nearest lake.

We'd put on our life vests and get the canoe going into the water. It was usually pretty uneventful. We'd stay a decent distance from the shore, avoid the float planes, and enjoy the freedom of paddling on bright, cool, summer days. I'm sure

we brought snacks or books or maybe even flip flops for swimming — though swimming in glacial lakes is usually a short activity.

One summer afternoon, we were paddling like normal, and, though I can't remember the specifics, I do know that we got some water in the canoe. This usually isn't that big of a deal, but we didn't have anything on hand to bail out the water, and it was a little more water than we knew quite what to do with. We started to row to shore, but something wasn't quite right. We were sitting awfully low in the water, and at one point, my elbows were close to the surface of the lake. In a word, we were sinking. I wasn't worried about dying — we had life vests, and I'm a strong swimmer. I was more worried about sinking a thousand dollar canoe.

We panicked. And then we talked to each other about some vaguely remembered water safety lesson wherein you somehow get IN the cold water and get the canoe flipped over your head, THEN somehow climb back in. Sensing that we wouldn't have much of a choice soon, we jumped out, got the canoe flipped — losing snacks and books to the watery deeps — and got ourselves more or less intact into the boat and back to shore. I remember the paperback I was reading mostly disintegrated. Boyish adventure over, we hiked the canoe back home, having learned that even friendly waters can come with danger.

That moment when I was paddling the canoe, only to realize that something was seriously wrong on our voyage seems an apt allegory for this bizarre time in which we are living. I don't know about you, but I sometimes feel like the boats in which we are traveling are filling with water fast — the national, political boat, the church boat, the health boat, and my favorite, the sanity boat. They all seem to be — if not quite sinking — then at least in danger of it. It's a scary time to be a paddler out there.

I have to think this is how the disciples felt on their voyage in today's Gospel. Seasoned fishermen, they nonetheless knew the power of a storm on the Sea of Galilee. The situation seemed somewhere between bleak and dire, which is exactly

how I'd rate our shared life at the moment. And what do they see? They see Jesus coming toward them.

In century after century, the miracle is attributed to Jesus walking on the water. And rightly so, it's a miraculous image. Or sometimes, people will take a lot of time talking about how Peter tried to be like Jesus but wasn't quite up to snuff and needed help. But for my money, the miracle is less that Jesus is walking on the water and more the direction in which he is walking. He could have gone anywhere he liked on that sea, and he decided to walk straight toward his followers, his disciples. He decided to walk straight toward us.

And so, in the midst of our health and political crises, instead of having a God who is far away, we instead have a God who is coming closer to us — storm or no storm. Maybe we are seasoned sailors; maybe it's our first time out. It doesn't matter, God in the person of Jesus is pursuing us across the waves, across the centuries, across the internet cables and right onto your screen. There is nothing you can do that will make God pursue you any less assiduously.

So, yes, these months are going to be bumpy. You might have to bail a little. The ship might rock and roll a bit. But that will not stop God from showing up. So, ready your sea legs and find your old life preserver. We are going on this strange 2020-2021 expedition together whether we like it or not. And no matter how we are tossed in the storm, Jesus will be right there, on the water, walking toward us. Amen.