

# Crossing to the Other Side

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*Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)*  
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Text: Mark 4:35-41

“Let us go across to the other side,” Jesus said, pointing out across the lake. It was late, and he had been teaching all day. He was exhausted, and the disciples were worn out too. And yet Jesus asks them, tired and weary, to set out with him on a journey.

Not just any journey. Jesus points out over the water. He wants to cross the sea. One thing you have to understand about the culture of the Jews of Jesus’ time is that the sea was a scary place. A roiling, wave-tossed body of water was the metaphor the scriptures used to talk about the nothingness, the chaos, that came before the creation of the world. Monsters like Leviathan lurked in the deep. Now, Peter and the disciples were better equipped than others to brave the sea. They were fishermen who made their living out on the water. Still, when you’re tired, when night is falling, it’s hard to silence those primal fears in the back of your mind. The sea was a place of danger.

When have you set sail into unknown waters? Maybe you’ve had an experience starting at a new school or job, or moving to a new town, away from everything comfortable and familiar. Last week after worship you heard about my plans to share my time between this congregation and the Presbytery of Southern New England starting later this summer. When you set off toward someplace you’ve never been, away from your familiar landmarks, you move cautiously through this new landscape, not quite sure what surprises are in store. It’s frightening and exciting all at once. And I imagine this is how those disciples felt, as they put out to sea under the setting sun.

But I suspect it wasn’t just the journey that made them nervous. It was the destination, too. “The other side” that Jesus wants to reach is the Decapolis, the district of Ten Towns. That was Gentile country. You’d have a hard time getting a decent kosher meal if you visited that place. You’d have to deal with a people whose food and practices might make you ritually unclean, according to Jewish law and tradition. And these people might be hostile and unwelcoming to a Jewish teacher and his friends. What interest could they possibly have in hearing Jesus’ message about the Kingdom of God, the God of the Jews? You can almost hear the disciples thinking, “Jesus, there’s a good reason *they* live over there, and *we* live over here, with a sea between us. We’re supposed to stay put. That’s the natural order. That’s how God wants it to be.” Jesus is asking these disciples to leave their comfort zone, to take a risk, and he’s doing so at a time when they are feeling weary and vulnerable. But to their credit, the disciples take Jesus with them and set sail, without a word.

This a story that brings into relief what sort of Savior Jesus is. This is a story about Jesus crossing boundaries that divide people. And there’s something very particular about which boundaries Jesus chooses to cross. In the push and pull of politics and religion in Roman Palestine, Jesus doesn’t come down on the side of any of the combatants. He’s not a Pharisee. He’s not a Sadducee. He’s not a Zealot rebel against the Romans, but he doesn’t work for the occupiers either. These boundaries and

the conflicts *between* powerful people that rage across them don't seem to interest Jesus at all. No, the boundaries Jesus cares about are the ones that divide the powerful from the poor, the well-respected from the outcast, the upright from the sinners. Wherever someone is hurting and neglected, if they've been decreed "off limits" by the people in charge, then Jesus wants to be with them, Jesus has time for them, whether it's a tax collector or a prostitute or someone with leprosy. And so he's willing to cross those in power—whatever party they belong to—he's willing to offend them, to be uncivil and discourteous with them, if it means a chance to minister to the left out and the left behind. The God-saturated heart of Jesus beats for the lonely and the lost.

Jesus is someone who healed on the Sabbath, crossing over from the side of the religious leaders to the side of the poor, hurting people aching for wholeness. He crossed over from the side of health and ritual cleanliness when he touched a man with leprosy—something no one was supposed to do—and healed him. Now he's crossing over a literal boundary between chosen people and not-chosen people, between Jews and Gentiles.

And it's scary. It feels to the disciples as though their whole world is being threatened, that the elements of nature are crashing in on them...

"A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped." The treacherous waves are breaking over the sides of the boat, filling it with water, and the boat is starting to sink. The whole world is upside-down, out of control. They're scared out of their minds, and probably a little angry too. Why did we let ourselves get talked into this crazy nighttime cruise? Why didn't we even say anything? I imagine they're bailing water as best they can, trying to keep from going under. They need every able-bodied passenger on the boat to pitch in if they're going to survive. Then, someone spots Jesus: "But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion." The disciples are outraged and hurt. Not only did Jesus convince them to go on this suicide mission, but now, when they need his help, he's oblivious to the danger. The fishermen grab their teacher and shake him roughly awake: "Rabbi, don't you care at all that we're about to die?"

Jesus does wake up, though, and he gets to work. "Peace, be still," he says to the waves. These are words you would use to quiet a rowdy preschool classroom. "Settle down, now, that's enough," he tells the sea. He's not in the least frightened or disturbed by the storm. And as the disciples look on in amazement, he turns to them and says, "Why are *you* afraid? Have you still no faith?" Don't you get it yet? he asks them.

The sea, the space that exists between the areas of dry land, is seen as a place of chaos and destruction in the Hebrew scriptures and their stories, but that's not the whole picture, is it? Because the surging, dark waters were also the canvas into which God spoke the words that brought light and life into creation. In the time of Noah, the waters surged forth and cleansed the earth of wickedness, giving creation a new beginning. During the Exodus, the waters of the sea parted to open a new and unknown way for God's people to journey from slavery toward their promised new home. The water of the sea, dangerous and frightening though it might be, is the place where God creates and saves.

When I was a freshman in college, I went on a Spring Break work trip to Mexico City, where I helped build a house with Habitat for Humanity with others from my campus ministry. There were needy families where I went to school in Upstate New York, too, and I had done some work with Habitat on homes for them. But I am so grateful for this experience of crossing over to the other side—into a different country, a different culture, a different language. Now, those of you that know something about Habitat know that families who receive Habitat homes have to put in something called

"sweat equity," working on the house alongside volunteers. They don't passively receive what other people give to them. But this family went above and beyond even that: they joined us in our morning devotions, praying and reading the scriptures with us in Spanish. They provided delicious food for us at lunchtime. And they cared for us when we got tired or sick. As a 19-year-old from the U.S., I went there thinking that I was generously "giving something back." But I learned that I had something to receive from these people of such strong faith and deep compassion. And I don't think I could have received anything like this gift without that journey with my college church across the border to a new, unknown place.

As disciples of Jesus, we're asked to take risks. We're asked to step outside of our comfort zone. And we're often asked to do these things at moments when it's not convenient, when we're tired, when there's a lot going on. But it's not some alien taskmaster asking us to get in the boat with him. It's Jesus, God-with-us, who has already taken a dangerous journey, crossing over to us, bridging the unbridgeable gap between God and human beings to love us and claim us. In Jesus God left the safety of heaven, exposed himself to the temptations and hurts and sadnesses of human life, and shared our brokenness. Thanks be to God that Jesus is a Savior who crosses over boundaries to be with the hurting and hoping people on the other side—because that's us! Jesus is only asking that we be as risky and vulnerable and adventurous in our love for God and our neighbor as he is in his love for us.

So what's the next stormy sea in our life as a church? What's the next risk God is asking you to take? Our lesson doesn't give us a plan but a promise. It promises us that when we set out on those stormy waters, we have a guide, a friend, a savior willing to risk everything for us, who calms the surging elements and dares us to deepen our trust, to believe that when Jesus sets our course, we'll arrive safely on the other side. Amen.