

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Signs and Wonders: Paddlers and Stragglers”

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When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, “It is I; do not be afraid.” Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.

The next day the crowd that had stayed on the other side of the sea saw that there had been only one boat there. They also saw that Jesus had not got into the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone. Then some boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus.

John 6:16-24

We pick up this week in our series “Signs and Wonders” right where we left off. Last week you might remember that we were with Jesus in the wilderness on the far side of the Sea of Galilee, where he gave one of the many signs in the Gospel of John. These signs were miraculous acts, but not just amazing things that happened. They had a purpose, and that purpose, as John tells us later is that we might believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that we may have life in his name. Last week, the sign he offered was a miraculous feeding, the feeding of the five-thousand as it’s called. That account ended in verse 15, and so this week, as we read a moment ago, we picked up right in verse 16. Right on the heels of this sign of bread and fish, the disciples depart, this time without Jesus, but Jesus comes to them, walking on the water. Will you pray with me?

Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Over a century ago, in the first decade of the twentieth century, the sun never set on the British Empire, or so the phrase had come to be used. You might have heard that phrase before: “The sun never sets on the British Empire.” It was a reference to the far-reaching influence of British rule, whether literally—meaning there territory was so global in scope that there was always some part of the Empire in which it was daytime—or maybe more abstractly—meaning the influence of British superiority, militarily, culturally, technologically, scientifically, economically, you name it, would endure forever.

So along with that sentiment came, for some at least within Great Britain, a sense of optimism for the future. It was thought to be a time of peace and plenty. Looking ahead to what they could expect in the years to come, there were some, perhaps many, who thought the future was looking bright.

Others, however, had a different view. They looked about and saw a disconnect between prominence of their country and the flourishing of their local communities. There was stark disagreement running the gamut from taxes to trade policies, protections for the working classes, reforms for the poor, public education. Resulted in divided politics, hung parliaments, and ruthless partisanship.

Then to top it all off was the staggering rate at which the nations of Europe, Britain included, had begun to arm themselves. An aggressive breed of nationalism had taken root across Europe, in which each nation thought itself superior to all others, and sought to build armies to match. Over the span of just a generation, military spending in four of the major powers that would soon feature in the First World War grew by 100%, and along with increasing tension and suspicion between these nations, the gears of war were starting to turn.

That's what others looked out and saw. Some looked ahead and saw an eternal sun upon the British Empire, while others looked ahead and saw great trouble.

Looking out over all of it and tasked with offering his own reflections on it was a man named G. K. Chesterton. Some of you may recognize that name. He's a well-known British Christian apologist and lay theologian, but he was also something of a literary pop star. He had a weekly column in one of the newspapers at the time, and in one of them, he was reflecting on the notion of progress. He was skeptical of advancement merely for advancement's sake, fearful of the prospect of war looming, and lamenting the fractured nature of the people around him.

At one point he wrote this: "We men and women are all in the same boat, upon a stormy sea. We owe to each other a terrible loyalty." "We men and women are all in the same boat, upon a stormy sea. We owe to each other a terrible loyalty."

Kind of an evocative phrase there: "a terrible loyalty." It was meant in a good way, not terrible as in, oh that's bad, but "terrible" in the sense of something of immense consequence, to the point of it actually being frightening. A terrible loyalty.

I can't say what precisely he had in mind when he wrote it, but I suppose it may not be too big a stretch, especially as he was a Christian, to imagine that this account of the disciples on the stormy sea wasn't too far from his thoughts: in the same boat, upon a stormy sea.

It's not like they wanted to be there. After they had witnessed thousands fed and satisfied by just a few loaves and a couple of fish, it was evening, and Jesus had withdrawn to a mountain by himself, leaving the disciples on their own. It seems they thought they were supposed to head to Capernaum on the other side of the Sea of Galilee, so in the fading light they get into a boat and start their way across.

Evening turns to night. Unfortunately a storm comes, a strong wind and a rough sea, and they're toiling out on the waves against the weather. At this point, in the middle of that storm, I'm wondering, if you took a poll among the disciples of just what they thought the future would hold for them, like the British public over a century ago, you'd get a mixed bag of answers. Even storm aside, you'd probably get a mixed bag. Sure for some of them, maybe most of them, they were optimistic about what things were in store with this Jesus. Could he be the Messiah? Was he here to set things right? Exciting stuff, to be sure. But then for at least one of them,

the seeds of doubt and disillusionment have been planted, that maybe future with this Jesus may not be all it had seemed to be. That was without the storm in the equation.

Now, though, with the waves crashing down, you can only imagine what they were thinking about the future. Even more variety. Maybe there were a few who remained optimistic, but then a good bunch of them may not be thinking that anything with this Jesus will matter much at all, since they would die out there on the sea that very night. They didn't know what the future held. Maybe some were hopeful, maybe some were disillusioned, maybe some were terrified, but I do know that in that trying hour, they were all literally, as Chesterton put it, in the same boat, on a stormy sea, owing each other a terrible loyalty.

Friends, on a Sunday morning like this morning, there is, like the disciples perhaps, or like Great Britain over a century ago, no doubt a mixed bag of opinion among us about what the future holds. There are some here today with feelings of great relief and optimism; there are others with great disappointment or disillusionment; still others perhaps with fear and trepidation; and then regardless of your thoughts on the election this past week, eventually we all realize that we're still in a pandemic with swirling uncertainty, impacting our relationships, our livelihoods, everything. And even take away the pandemic, and we as a church are still faced with the daunting, downright terrifying mission of carrying the witness of Christ, of furthering his kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, of sharing the gospel of grace, all to a world that is increasingly either antagonistic toward it or altogether indifferent. Like the disciples, we're in the same boat, on a stormy sea.

But do we really owe each other what Chesterton thought we owed each other: that terrible loyalty? Sure it's easy to stay loyal to folks who think like you, agree with you, vote like you, but I'd be willing to guess that for some of us, mutual loyalty is not the first thing we think of when we consider that there are those we share a faith with within our church with passionately held political views that differ from our own. Especially in a time as charged and as tense as this, loyalty may not be the first thing we think of, but it's what we need. It's what we must do.

Why? Well, if you asked the disciples, no doubt they felt the need for that terrible loyalty among themselves when they were out in the rough seas and the strong winds, if at the very least for survival's sake.

But I don't think that's the only reason. I'm not sure it's even the most important reason.

I think a big reason we the church are called to that terrible loyalty is precisely for those who are not a part of the church. Look at what happens after the disciples left that evening. After they go, the next day the crowd, the same crowd that had been given the loaves and fish, notice that Jesus and the disciples weren't there, but they knew that the disciples had gone on ahead. John tells us that they went on to the other side of the sea, looking for Jesus, but notice this: they didn't know where Jesus had gone. They knew the disciples had gone on ahead, but they didn't know where Jesus had gone. But they get in the boats themselves, and go the way the disciples did. They were looking for Jesus, but they go where the disciples went. Why? Because they knew that wherever the disciples were going, Jesus would be there too.

Friends, the church is tasked with something that goes far beyond the platform of any political party or the capacity of any political candidate: we are to be an outpost of the kingdom of heaven in a broken world, a witness to the gospel of Christ's grace, and because that witness is an inherently public one, sometimes that calling might intersect with civic interests but can never be subsumed by them. Such a task in an increasingly hostile world could make for stormy seas on the best of days, but it is the mission that has been given to us, and

it will take all of us together, working with each other, hearing each other, loving each other, giving generously, sharing generously, joining generously in the work of ministry.

And why? Just for our own survival? No. Much more than that. It is because when the crowd starts looking, where will the church be? When billions ask, where is the Lord? (Even if they don't quite know what or who they're looking for, even if they might be looking for Jesus but don't even know it yet, where will the church be? Would they see the church fragmented, just as fractured as the society they grow weary of, or would they see that the church has gotten into the boat together and has gone on ahead, no matter any uncertainty of what's to come. When that moment comes, may it be known and evident that where the church goes, Jesus goes too, for we go to him.

And even as we're straining at the oars in the rough seas and the strong winds, demonstrating to each other a glimpse of that terrible loyalty, an amazing thing can happen, a sign in the midst of the storm. Jesus comes, walking on the water, saying "It is I; do not be afraid."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.