

Crossing to the Other Side

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United Church of Strafford, Vermont

June 20, 2021 Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32; Mark 4:35-41

Call to Worship: Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this Fourth Sunday after Pentecost. It is such a joy to have you here both on Zoom and in the sanctuary.

One of the classic images for transition in the Bible is crossing water. Jacob crosses the River Jabbok as he takes on his new name of Israel. The children of Israel cross the Red Sea into the wilderness and cross the River Jordan into the Promised Land. Jesus and the disciples take boats across the Sea of Galilee into new ministries.

Crossings signify endings on one shore followed by beginnings on another. In between often come ordeals.

Faith tells us that God's love and care will be with us, that the Spirit's guidance and strength will help us and that God will make a way where there was no way across the waters, leading to peace and joy and a better world.

Let us worship together in this hope, all in the same boat of this church, wherever we may be ...

Crossing to the Other Side

Humans have always found it challenging to navigate life changes. That is why the scriptures offer wisdom about them—because we cannot evolve, we cannot be transformed and transform the world around us into the realm of God on earth if we are not skilled at change.

Transitions require crossing from the end of one thing, through all the emotional and logistical struggle of the in-between time, to arrive at the other shore and a new beginning.

The same principles apply whether the transition is graduation or marriage or illness or a new job or moving or becoming parents or aging or dying. Whatever change you are going through, this wisdom can help you reach the other shore in peace and ready for what comes next.

Psalm 107 reminds us of God's steadfast love that redeems us from trouble. Storms arise on the waters of life, a calamity of waves. Our courage melts. We stagger, sea-sick, disoriented, unstable in the chaos of adversity. Ships founder that we have constructed, our coping

mechanisms, the institutions we have counted on, the behavior of others or of the earth—all turn upside down in a sudden squall. We see no way out of the maelstrom. We get dashed to rock bottom.

Then, the Psalm says,

They cried to God in their trouble.

God brought them out from their distress,
and made the storm be still,
and hushed the waves of the sea.

Then they were glad because they had quiet,
and God brought them to their desired haven.

The other day my stepdaughter Marian was doing a crossword puzzle and the clue was “A pastor’s advice.” She knows me and got it, as any child in this congregation would: “Pray.” Times come when human powers fail us, when reaching out to the higher power of the Spirit is the only thing that can connect us to the steadfast love and redemption we need in order to cross to the other side.

We need to trust that this really works. 12 Step groups have saved millions of people from the storms and shipwrecks of addiction. The first three steps are to admit that we have reached a point where we are powerless to change, second, to believe that a power higher than ourselves can restore us, and third, to entrust our will and our life to that higher power’s care.

We see this in the Gospel story. Jesus says, “Let us cross over to the other side.” The slogan, “Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever,” (Hebrews 13:8) does not mean Jesus is against change, it means he is constantly urging us to make the same change: to cross to the new shore that love and God’s realm on earth require.

“Leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat.” Change, growth, evolution can mean leaving the crowd behind. We need to be prepared to be different, and to feel the loss and loneliness that come. Of course, we might also feel relief and rest. Leaving the crowd is an ending, and one way or another we will have feelings about it.

And Jesus, the embodiment of the Spirit’s compassion, will be with us all the way, although, once we leave the old shore, storms may arise and it may seem as if he is asleep. We

may feel afraid in a dark night of soul like the disciples who prayed, “Teacher, do you not care that we are dying?”

Even prayers of anger or despair can connect us to the Spirit. The waves may still be crashing, we may still be drowning, but at our core we can find the peace that comes through faith that God’s steadfast love and redeeming power are with us.

Jesus enabled the disciples to reach “the other side,” which in this case meant moving from the Jewish to the Gentile shore. Jesus led the disciples to overcome racism and the exclusion of people who were shut out by religious and social institutions. He asked his followers to risk their standing with the crowds and authorities because the realm of God’s universal, unconditional love was waiting on the other side.

Biblical scholars point out that one of the reasons the disciples panicked was that they did not understand the purpose of the trip. (Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, Section 6.C.ii)

William Bridges writes in *Managing Transitions* that understanding transitions is the first step toward managing them. It helps to have a sense both of the problem that a sea crossing is trying to address and the purpose of the specific journey. The problem Jesus faced was that people were shut out from the beloved community. His purpose was to bring them the good news that a divided humanity could be healed and live as one, and to show them the way.

A shared vision helps in times of transition. Moses painted the picture of a Promised Land flowing with milk and honey. Jesus not only taught his vision of the realm of God’s love on earth but also created models of it by eating with outcasts and enemies and touching the impure to heal them.

It helps also to have two plans, one for the logistical change and one for the inner transition.

The disciples didn’t know Christ’s plans, but we do. The logistical plan is to break down every barrier to justice, to cross every stormy sea to create the realm of God’s oneness and love. The inner plan is to turn to Jesus in the boat when we feel anxiety or grief or despair, and to turn to one another with compassion and support.

We each need to know that we have a part to play in the plan.

The disciples didn’t get it at first, but after the Spirit filled them at Pentecost, they got it. The Book of Acts and letters of Paul show the courage they had on all kinds of stormy seas

because they knew the problem and purpose, they could picture the vision, they had a plan and a part to play in it. This transformed them from a lost, grieving cult to a movement that transformed the world.

On March 13, 2020, the small boat of this church got hit by a pandemic hurricane. The Church Council met after that Friday evening concert to decide what to do. Thanks to the collective wisdom of the Council, within two hours we had faced the problem, agreed to the purpose, pictured the kind of church we wanted to be in the pandemic, formed a plan and identified the parts we would play. We were ready to step out on that strange new shore.

The changes and inner transitions were not complete that night. We made discoveries and course corrections over the coming months.

We became an even closer, more beloved community as we made the long transition together.

Now we face a new crossing. You would think that leaving the pandemic time would be less stormy than entering it, but we face uncertainties and unprecedented decisions and changes ranging from rapidly evolving pandemic protocols to new ways to worship, and we are reentering a world in social and environmental upheaval.

It will help the transition ahead if we form a common understanding of problems and purposes, if we can picture a vision of the other side we are trying to reach, if we have plans and each see parts we can play.

It will help if we remember that Jesus is the one calling us forward, and that he is here in the boat with us, and we can turn to him and awaken ourselves to the Spirit and find peace as we go.

Let us pray in silence, asking the Spirit for the wisdom and strength we need in all the transitions in our lives, giving thanks at the same time for the grace we have already received...

A Haiku by Mel Goertz:

As we passed,
a newborn fawn lay in orchard grass
mother doe standing by.