

“Boat Potatoes”

A sermon by the Rev. Jim Bell

Duke Memorial United Methodist Church
Durham, NC
10:55 a.m. Sunday, November 4, 2007

Text: Genesis 12:1-9

Matthew 14:22-33

NRSV

Opening prayer: Lord Jesus, give us receptive hearts and eyes of faith, that we may trust you and follow you. Amen.

At the climax of the movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, Indiana has to pass three supreme tests to reach the Holy Grail and save his father, who is dying. The first test is “The Breath of God.” As he walks down a corridor, Indiana must bow down at precisely the right moment to keep from having his head cut off by large, revolving metal blades.

The second test is “The Word of God.” He must walk on just the right stones – the ones that spell God’s name in Latin – to keep from falling through the floor to his death. The third test, “The Path of God,” is the most difficult. Indiana comes to the edge of a large chasm – about a hundred feet across and a thousand feet down. On the other side of the chasm is the doorway to the Holy Grail. The instructions say, “Only in the leap from the lion’s head, will he prove his worth.”

Indiana says to himself, “It’s impossible. Nobody can jump this.” Then he realizes that this test requires a leap of faith. His father says, “You must believe, boy. You must believe! Even though every nerve and fiber of his being screams that he must not do it, Indiana walks to the edge of the cliff, lifts his foot, and steps out into thin air.

If you have seen the movie, you know what happens next. Indiana does not plummet to his death, but is upheld by an invisible force. How much faith is required? Not perfect certainty. Indiana Jones can have doubts – a whole cavern full of them. He needs only enough faith to take

a step – to put his life on the line. He has to take the step first. If he does not take the step, he will never know that the invisible bridge is there.

Living by faith is trusting Jesus enough to move toward him. Our gospel lesson is an intriguing story of Jesus interacting with his disciples and particularly Peter. Last Sunday we considered where we are in the story. Like the disciples, are we terrified of the storm and the ghost we see walking toward us? Are we like Peter? We have heard God's call and are willing to step out in faith to move toward Jesus.

Or are we like Peter when he begins to sink beneath the waves? The strong winds of problems overcome our faith. Or are we like Peter and the disciples once Jesus saves Peter and gets into the boat. We have experienced salvation and proclaim to Jesus, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Today we focus on Peter climbing out of the boat to walk toward Jesus. Jesus tells the disciples, "Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid." Peter responds, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Jesus replies, "Come."

Put yourself in Peter's place for a moment. You have a sudden insight into what Jesus is doing. Jesus is passing by on the water. Jesus is inviting you to go on the adventure of your life. But at the same time, you are scared to death. What would you choose – the water or the boat? The boat is safe, secure, comfortable.

On the other hand, the water is rough. The waves are high. The wind is strong. There is a storm out there. If you get out of the boat, there's a good chance you might sink. But if you don't get out of the boat, there's a guaranteed certainty that you will never walk on the water. If you want to walk on the water, you have to get out of the boat.

Now I want to ask you a question. Does anybody here know the name of the best-selling chair in America? La-Z-Boy. Not Risk-E-Boy. Not Work-R-Boy. La-Z-Boy.

We want to immerse ourselves in comfort. A husband and wife were sitting in the living

room when he remarked, “Just for the record, I never want to live in a vegetative state dependent on some machine. If that ever happens, just pull the plug.” His wife stood up, walked across the room and unplugged the TV set.

We have developed a whole language around this. People say, “I want to go home and veg out – make myself as much like vegetation as humanly possible, preferably in front of a television set. We have a name for people who do this in front of TV, too: couch potatoes. Couch potatoes in their La-Z-Boys.

John Ortberg writes that the eleven disciples in the boat could be called “boat potatoes.” They didn’t mind watching, but they didn’t want to actually do anything.

Some people in churches these days want some of the comfort associated with spirituality, but they don’t want the risk and challenge that go along with actually following Jesus. Yet Jesus is still looking for people who will get out of the boat.

What is your boat? Your boat is whatever represents safety and security to you apart from God himself. Want to know what your boat is? Your fear will tell you. Ask yourself this: What is it that most produces fear in me – especially when I think of leaving it behind and stepping out in faith?

For David, it is his vocation. He has been a builder for 35 years. He is in his late 50s now. But he has been troubled his whole life by a sense that God was calling him into church ministry. He has quieted his conscience by giving away a lot of money and doing many good things, but he can’t shake off the haunting fear that he has missed his calling. Now he’s afraid that perhaps it’s too late.

For Kathy it is relationship. She has been involved for years with a man whose commitment to her is ambivalent at best. He is sending her signals that everyone else can read clearly. He never initiates the language of affection, avoids talking about their future, and creates as much distance as possible. She never pursues discovering his true feelings – she’s too

frightened. She doesn't believe she could handle losing him. Her boat is pretty shaky, but she is too scared to leave.

Doug's boat is secrecy. He is addicted to pornography. It is a mild addiction, or so he tells himself, mostly adult movies on business trips and occasional sprees on the internet. Nothing that has cost him a job or a marriage – so far. But no one knows. He is afraid to admit it. He's afraid to get help. Secrecy is killing him. But it is his boat.

Kim's boat is her dad. She raises her children, keeps her house, and pursues a career designed to make her dad happy. The irony is that her dad is not happy, and nothing she can do will ever be enough to please him. But the thought of displeasing him terrifies her. His approval is a pretty leaky vessel. But it's her boat.

What is your boat? In what area of your life are you shrinking back from fully and courageously trusting God? Fear will tell you what your boat is. Leaving it may be the hardest thing you ever do. But if you want to walk on the water, you have to get out of the boat.

I believe there is someone – the Holy Spirit – inside us who tells us there is more to life than sitting in the boat. We were made for something more than merely avoiding failure. There is something inside you that wants to walk on the water – to leave the comfort of routine existence and abandon yourself to the high adventure of following God.

Because of the wind and the storm, some people decide never to leave the boat. You might as well know now, there is no guarantee that life in the boat is going to be any safer.

Ellen Guder writes, “You can live on bland food so as to avoid an ulcer, drink no tea, coffee or other stimulants in the name of health, go to bed early, stay away from night life, avoid all controversial subjects so as never to give offense, mind your own business, avoid involvement in other people's problems, spend money only on necessities and save all you can. You can still break your neck in the bath tub, and it will serve you right.”

Larry Laudan has spent the last decade studying risk-management. He summarizes

literature on risk management in 19 principles. The first principle is the simplest: Everything is risky.

Living by faith is trusting Jesus enough to move toward him. It is life worth living.

President Theodore Roosevelt once said, “It’s not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena . . . who, at best, knows in the end the triumph of great achievement, and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly. So that his place will never be with those cold timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.”

If people of faith never got out of the boat, we would have no one portrayed in these stained-glass windows. Not Deborah or Ruth or Sarah or Rachel. Not Dorcas or Lydia or Anna or Elisabeth. Not Philip or Timothy or Stephen or John the Baptist. Not Moses or Ezra or Joseph or Abraham, way in the back. And these people just scratch the surface of the saints of biblical history.

For Indiana Jones, he had to take one step into the chasm. For Peter, he climbed out of the boat when he heard Jesus say, “Come.” What step of faith is the Lord calling you to take today? Amen.