

Left Ahead
Preached by Rev. Patrick Hunnicutt
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Focus Text: Matthew 14: 22-33

Hear again the opening words to our Scripture text, in case you missed them.

“Immediately, Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, being battered and tormented by the waves, was far from the land, and the wind was against them.”

If there is a scene in Scripture that bears a more uncanny resemblance to our life together as a church, I’m not sure what it would be.

I wonder if you made the connection. Matthew vividly describes the hardships endured by a religious community whose teacher, leader and friend had gone away to the mountain to cross the great divide into fuller communion with God.

I knew, once I read this text, that this HAD to be the text for this Sunday, only two Sundays removed from our public celebration of Karen Blomberg’s life...this HAD to be the scriptural setting for the Sunday on which Karen herself was scheduled to preach and occupy this pulpit.

In her absence, it is my hope that this text will allow us, as KB would have wanted, to be compassionate observers of how we are doing, what’s going on for us, and to assess, at least initially, where we are headed.

The truth is, we’re all experiencing this new reality differently. Certainly, we share a common sadness, but our grieving in these last few weeks has taken many forms – for some, it comes through tears, others with quiet resolve, others still with distraction and busy-ness.

Our relationships and experiences with Karen were not the same, so our level of grief is bound to vary. For some of us, Karen was a lifeline in the counseling room, living room, or the Haverkamp room. Others of us encountered Karen more from afar, a warm, wise and welcoming banjo player strumming in the distance. There’s no way that each of us will be in the same place when it comes to her being gone.

And yet, we all share this same new reality of her absence. We’re all in this together. And as time marches onward, precious second after precious second, we realize that where we have been, and where we are now, is not where we will remain. Something, or someone, compels us forward.

Many of you, in coming here, saw the PowerPoint presentation that one of Karen’s friends composed. It’s currently on display near the front office, and if you haven’t seen it, you should take a look. I imagine that those you did see it really enjoyed the wonderful images of Karen being Karen, and the music that now connects us to her so vividly. You probably didn’t want to pull yourself away. But eventually, either energetically or reluctantly, you proceeded into this sanctuary. Eventually, you came and sat in your pew, and responded to the call to worship. Something, either inside or outside of you, beckoned you away from there, into here, into the realm of God.

That movement characterizes our collective life as a church. In the last few weeks, we have spent some good times staring, metaphorically and literally, at images of Karen that bring smiles and tears to our faces. We can, and should, and will continue to do so. But in God, we are also emboldened and compelled to carry those smiles and tears forward, into the people and places God calls us to be. We are not un-affected by Karen's death, but we are un-deterred from our mindful and meandering journey towards faith, hope and love -- in God and for each other.

During the senior high mission trip, the youth, advisors and I relied heavily on the GPS systems in our rental cars. Our particular devices had a particular way of announcing when we had reached our chosen destination. An authoritative, almost scolding female voice would proclaim, "You have arrived." It made me chuckle every time, as though the machine had conferred upon us the sum of all our metaphysical searching and striving. But her promise of arrival was alas, a false one. We had arrived, indeed, but only to that temporal moment. There was still much to do, much to experience *after* we had reached that place.

That forward sense of direction, of not remaining where we are but moving along the way, really shines through in our text today. Matthew makes a point of telling us that Jesus made the disciples go into the boat and sent them *ahead*, to the other side.

To paraphrase, Jesus leaves them, in the boat, to go ahead, to the other side.

Left...ahead. There's a sermon title in that! Indeed, there is. Jesus does not leave his disciples *behind*. He leaves them *ahead*. *It's a distinction there worth noting. IT is easier to illustrate than describe (and beware, I may mix a metaphor or two)*

Left behind is the book series by the same name, where the world's Christians are suddenly whisked away to the heavenly realm, leaving the rest of humanity to suffer amidst the depravity of a broken creation. Being left behind is like the movie, Home Alone, where the parents of a young boy leave him behind while they dash off to vacation, leaving him by himself to fend against villains and robbers.

Being "left ahead" is a different story. "Left ahead" is the same young boy standing with his parents on the sidewalk on his first day of school. He's scared to death and wants nothing else but to stay home in his comfortable surroundings. But the school-bus comes, the air-breaks squeal, and the glass doors open. He doesn't want to go, but his parents compel him into the bus, and he's whisked away into 12 years of learning and discovery, none of which is easy, all of which is exhilarating. In 13 years, the same parents will pull into a college parking lot, unload a dorm room's worth of clothes and electronics, and tearfully say goodbye, as their young son takes his first eager steps into independence and adulthood. They pull out of the lot, leaving him ahead, not behind.

By going up to that mountain to pray, Jesus has left his disciples *ahead*. He isn't consigning them to the scraps of life while he gets on with heaven's business on the mountain. He's compelling them into the bus, sending them forward, to the place where heaven's handiwork awaits them. In that place across the watery divide, called Gennesaret, the disciples would witness one of the most dazzling displays of healing they had ever seen, an opening ceremony-like demonstration of God's healing power.

Getting there wasn't easy. It was downright terrifying and awful. There were moments when amidst the waves, the disciples' faith would waver. But the Jesus who left them ahead also came from behind and boarded the boat, and stilled the waters. And together, they journeyed on...all the way to the cross of calvary and the empty tomb of Easter Sunday.

In a few minutes, we will be taking communion together, this time by intinction. Those who are able will come forward, and receive the gift of Christ's body, broken for you, and the cup of salvation, poured out for you. When you receive the elements, you will have a moment to stop and savor them. But you can't remain where you are. Jesus bids you to take his body, take his salvation, somewhere else: to your homes, your families, your workplace and school.

We have not arrived. We have been left ahead...into God's realm. We do not simply "Move on" from the grief and sadness, but we do not linger in the midst of it. Though we smile and cry at the memories, we do not dwell permanently in eulogies, but embark on living, with compassion, courage, authenticity. Faith.

It's stormy, but we'll get there.

In God, through Christ, by the Spirit. We will.

Truly. Amen.