

Setting Sail

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Did you hear that? Did you hear that rumble in the building that sounded like engines revving up? It happened a few minutes ago as the lesson from the Acts of the Apostles was being read. It felt as if something big was taking off here, coming right down the center aisle. Could you feel a burst of energy and momentum? Sometimes I think that we should provide seat belts in our pews for your safety when we read the Holy Scriptures. Today is one of those times, so please buckle up.

We have just heard the story of one of the turning points in Christianity. It starts like many other stories in the Bible: there is a dream or a vision that results in a call to action. This happens several times in the Acts of the Apostles, especially to Paul. The first time he had a vision of Jesus who ordered him to change his ways and join the Christian community. Paul did that and became a leader in the movement to bring others to God through Christ.

Our lesson today begins with another dream, and this time Paul hears the voice of a European man pleading for help. "Come over to Macedonia and help us," the voice cries. So, Paul and his companions set sail for Macedonia.

Here is where the engines start to rumble. It is when the momentum builds up because this was no ordinary boat ride. When Paul embarked on **this** particular voyage, Christianity crossed the borders of the Middle East and ventured into Europe. It left behind its familiar Jewish roots and culture. On this trip, Christianity changed from a local religion into an international movement. It would become a world religion that transcends continental boundaries and finds expression in many different cultures.

But who knew this when Paul and his companions bought third class tickets on a boat headed for Macedonia? Who could have imagined that this little group of believers carried the seeds of our faith in their hearts?

Perhaps this is why there is a dramatic change in the text: did you hear it? The narrative reads like a news item, written in the third person voice. But suddenly there is an interruption, as if someone grabs the microphone and speaks in the first person. "They" becomes "we." "We set sail," the voice says. "We set sail from Troas and took a straight course..."

This is not second hand; this is an eye witness account. It should send shivers down our spines. Here is someone's actual experience. The Church set sail from Troas and floated toward European shores. "We set sail" and Christianity soon found new expression in what would become Western culture, our culture.

The Church set sail and headed straight toward us, here in Boston. Today in this magnificent church, we stop and remember that we are rooted in the faith, the visions, and the border crossings of our forebears. They were searching for God, just like we are. They, too, wanted to experience the Holy. They were thirsty for the spiritual life. And when they discovered that Jesus was a pathway to God, they set sail to share the news which continues to travel today.

Many centuries have passed since this story of Paul's voyage. Empires have come and gone, human knowledge has exploded, and societies and cultures have been transformed. And yet, we are still looking for God. The hunger for God has not diminished with time.

All around the world, people pursue the Holy One, the God and Creator of all. There are many spiritual paths, and they are filled with pilgrims who want to connect with the Divine. In Tibet today, prayer wheels spin continuously, sending out humanity's longing into the universe. In Jerusalem, Jews pray at the Western Wall, reciting the Torah, while several stories above in the mosque of the Dome of the Rock, Muslims pray the words of the Koran.

For those of us in the Church, we find our path through Jesus. In Jesus we see the revelation of God in human experience. The theologian Marcus Borg says it best in his book entitled JESUS. While the mystery of God goes way beyond our human understanding, Borg reminds us that: "Jesus reveals, discloses, what can be seen of God in a human life and what a life filled with God looks like." "...what can be seen is the character and passion of God...what God is like...what God is passionate about, what God most cares about."

In Christ, we see that God cares deeply about us, and is so passionate about humanity that Jesus was sent into our experience to draw us onto the path toward God.

I hope that many of you here have seen the movie, CONTACT, a film based on a story written by the late Carl Sagan. The main character is a scientist, played by Jodie Foster. She is convinced that contact can be made with other forms of life in the universe. She devotes her life to this exploration and lives in a desert filled with enormous satellites, hoping for a signal from outer space. Her whole life is consumed with listening for one little sound coming through the satellite that would indicate contact with the universe.

By the end of the story, she is actually launched into space and finds herself in the presence of her beloved father who had died many years ago. But this is not the climax of the movie. The climax comes when she realizes that what she contacted in the Universe has taken on a familiar face in order to meet her, to reassure rather than overwhelm her. It is not her father. It is an experience of infinite power and a love that offers itself in the idiom of her particular experience. All the satellites in the world cannot contain the echo of the Divine, but the Creator of the universe contacts her in the limited forms that she knows, through sound and a beloved human face.

In the same way, God is revealed to us through the human face of Jesus. The early Christians called their spiritual journey “the Way,” and it gained momentum as others began to see signs of the Holy in their faith and action. In the Acts of the Apostles, the Church turned a corner when the followers of Jesus responded to a call for help from a foreign culture. The Christians did not hesitate anymore than Jesus hesitated in the face of human need. They set sail and took a straight course as they followed Jesus. They discovered God along the Way.

Following Jesus is now our Way as we move toward God everyday of our lives. Voices continue to cry out:

Come over and help us.

Come over to Darfur.

Come over to Guantanamo.

Come over to American neighborhoods filled with despair.

Come over and help us.

We set sail, over and over again as we follow Jesus in the Church. We set sail everyday as we interact with the world around us.

As Borg reminds us, “It is a life of deep commitment and gentle certitude.” Let us pray that Christ will always deepen our commitment. Let us be certain of God’s deep love for us, for all people, and all of creation.

AMEN