

## “The Big Skipper in the Sky”

Matthew 17:1-9

As we slowly motored out of the Marina in Puerto Villarta, Mexico, the sun was already beaming from a totally blue sky. Mrs. Kroch, whose late husband founded McDonalds had her huge, white, and luxurious power yacht tied to the dock on our left. Straight ahead were two “Love Boats”, huge cruisers filled with touristos. Then the ocean with its blues and greens.

John and Chip immediately raised the main sail and we were silently gliding outward with dolphins playfully leading the way. John and Chip had invited us to sail with them the day before. In those beginning conversations, we learned these two men were in their 40’s, single, and had been living on their boat for three years. Being money oriented, we wondered how grown men in their prime working age could afford to sail up and down the west coasts of California, Mexico, and Central America.

Over the next 24 hours we were to learn quickly the “gospel according to John”. John and Chip had been where we were. John a real estate salesman and Chip a mechanical engineer. They had invested some savings and inheritance, bought a sail boat, and escaped from what we so lovingly name the “rat race”.

Today they would teach four “rat racers” from Fargo and two from Canada what it was like to follow the “Big Skipper in the Sky”. Jimmy Buffett music provided the background. The sailboat gliding across the ocean was the pulpit, John was the preacher, and we were his congregation. It would be a 12-hour sermon on God giving us new life.

We took turns learning to steer the boat and how to keep it on course. When getting off course, never bring it back too quickly or you end up going too far in the other direction. Keep a steady course. Good advice for all of us.

When the wind is favorable and we can depend on God for power, shut down the artificial engines that we think we need to get us there quicker. The wind of God is the only power we need most of the time. When we become dependent on artificial power, our hearts wear out and attack us. John simply said, “people don’t die of a heart attack at sea”.

Our destination today is the “tres Mariatas”, three islands 20 miles out in the middle of Paradise. From a distance they looked like three rocks sticking out of the ocean, not much to look at. But the closer we got, the more beautiful they became.

We dropped anchor and the sermon continued. John took us in is dingy between rocks and corals to a protected, white and sandy beach straight from heaven. He took us into caves so powerfully cut out by thousands of years of incoming tides. Nesting birds on the grass ledges above with blue, webbed feet. Then we snorkeled. Fish fluorescent blue, bright yellow, polka-dotted, big and small. A beautiful and different world, serene and peaceful. We looked down and we believed.

As the sun began to dip slowly into the west, we began our journey back. The wind became much stronger, and a more colorful second sail was raised to take full advantage of God’s gift. Within minutes the sun disappeared behind us and the sky glowed a bright red in remembrance.

As the moon brightened and the stars turned on, the sermon began its conclusion. John stood on his pulpit as it left a phosphorescent glow in its wake behind him. He shared the “great equation”. “Every day that you spend at sea, the Big Skipper in the sky does not count against you in the Book of life.” And somehow, we knew that John spoke the truth.

I will always be the first to emphasize our calling as followers of Jesus Christ to be with people, to worship in a church as a congregation, to go out during the week and minister to people around us. Being with people. Touching people. Serving people. We are thereby being with, touching, and serving God. That’s what Christianity is all about.

I have been asked many times, “How do you experience God? How do you, pastor, experience the Holy Spirit?” My answer is that usually I experience God coming to me, communicating with me, touching me, through the people around me, through the people I interact with daily. Whether it be holding hands with and praying with you in a hospital room, in a restaurant, or in my office; it is through those kinds of interactions and prayer that Christ’s presence and power can be felt when we open ourselves to it.

But there are other ways God comes to us. Many times, in the gospel stories, Jesus withdraws from the crowds and from his disciples to be alone and to pray. This morning, he asks 3 of his disciples to climb a high mountain, to get away from all the people, and to pray.

I think of the Colorado Rocky Mountains that I climbed with our Divinity youth in 2004 and 2010. As we climbed those mountains, as our muscles stiffened up and we gasped for oxygen, we asked the question, “Why?”

When we reached the summit, we knew why. The silence of the blowing wind. The awesome view that takes in hundreds of miles of God's creation. The dry taste of the mountain air. The empty feeling in our stomach and legs from the exertion in getting to the top. The climb was worth it. God was present and very close.

That feeling and that faith of being closer to God re-energizes us, refuels us for the journey back down the mountain and into life. Where is your mountain? Where is your island that you can go to, to feel close to God, to pray, and to be re-energized for life? Do you have a place? You don't have to climb a Rocky Mountain or sail to a Pacific Island. Maybe a bedroom or a basement room. Maybe a favorite tree in the backyard or a favorite hill in a field that allows us to see for miles. We should all have a place that allows us to be with God by ourselves.

Jesus had just finished feeding the multitude with seven loaves and a few fish. He had just healed a blind man. He had just preached a sermon. He was ready to climb a mountain and to look to the Big Skipper in the Sky to be revitalized.

“His face shone like the sun and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him”.

On this Sunday we celebrate and we remember the Transfiguration of Our Lord. For a fleeting moment the human appearance of Jesus is changed into the heavenly being as he will be seen on the last day, the Day of Resurrection. On that mountaintop, Jesus becomes a door and through it comes eternity to visit the 3 disciples.

The two men who come from eternity to visit Jesus are Moses and Elijah. Moses, to whom God gave the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai. Elijah the prophet, who defeated the priests of King Ahab and his god, Baal, on Mt. Carmel.

Moses and Elijah, who communicated with God on mountains, return to the mountaintop. By their presence on the new Mt. Sinai, they witness to the fulfillment of the Old Testament. The Son of God had come in all his glory.

As the disciple Peter witnesses Jesus' transfiguration and the appearance of the two visitors, he realizes he has no coffee or nut rolls to offer them. So, he offers to build them three booths or tabernacles to commemorate the moment. Peter wanted to build something visible so people could remember what had just happened. Today we would want to take a picture or build a monument to remember.

Just as Peter suggests they build these 3 tabernacles, the words were still on his lips, when suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son the beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

Forget your talking, forget the monuments, just listen to him. The message from Transfiguration Mountain is clear. It's a message for all of us. Listen to the Word of God revealed in Jesus Christ, and then let what you hear govern your life.

First, we listen. We can hear the Word of God here at Divinity on Sunday mornings, Saturday nights, on the Warmline, and in Bible Studies throughout the week. We listen.

Then we find our island or our mountaintop, where we can be alone or with a few good friends. A place where we can sit in silence and read the Bible. A place where we can sit in

silence and pray. A place where we can feel closer to the Big Skipper in the Sky. A place where God's presence can be felt as it revitalizes and fills us for the journey ahead. A place where we can listen.

Then we can come back into the daily routine of life with new energy and with Jesus in our hearts. The people around us will feel the energy, will feel the power flowing forth into them as we serve and minister to them. The people around us, our families, people we work with, will experience the Holy Spirit through us just as we sometimes feel the Holy Spirit coming to us through our grandson who says, "I love you", or through a friend who holds our hand and prays with us.

We feel the Holy Spirit coming to us and into Daenerys as she is adopted into God's family in the sacrament of Holy Baptism. We promise to provide her with opportunities to continue to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit as we raise and nurture her in the Christian faith.

It begins with us. It begins with our willingness to take the time to find our special place and to listen. Jesus listened to Moses and Elijah. He knew the cross was his to bear. As he went down from that mountain, he knew his destiny was a painful and humiliating death on the cross. But Jesus also knew something else.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered his disciples, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead".

We follow Jesus' journey. We bear our crosses every day in servanthood. We find our special place, our special island to be refilled with the Spirit. We serve some more and then we

die. But death is not the end. Death is simply the door to Paradise and Eternity and the Big Skipper in the Sky.

So, let's follow Jesus to Jerusalem, to the cross, and to the empty tomb. Shall we? Shall we observe Lent with fasting, extra Wednesday night worship, self-discipline, more prayer, extra service to God and one another? Should we go with Jesus? Join Jesus on the journey down the mountain into life and through a vale of tears and pain to Easter morning.

May the peace of God . . .

#314 – Arise, Your Light Has Come