

Emmanuel Church, Staunton
June 24, 2018
Sermon, Roger Bowen

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.
Mark 4:38 - 41

*“Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?”
He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, “Quiet! Be still!” Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.*

Today’s powerful passage from Mark has been foundational for many sermons about overcoming hardship, about trusting Jesus to be “in our boat” when things get rough, about faith overcoming fear, about being victorious over adversity.

Questions like: What was or is **your** boat or storm - The Church? A hospital? An illness? Your family? A difficult time in the work place? A marriage? An addiction? What is your boat? What is your storm? Is Jesus in your boat?

For my wife, Kennon and me it was an actual boat. A sailboat. And, a real storm. Once upon a time... 46 years ago.

So, today’s homily is more a personal story than a sermon.

Peace Corps service often dishes up powerful moments in volunteers’ lives. There was one day during our first year in the Kingdom of Tonga in the South Pacific that stands out as the most poignant during our time on the outer island of Ha'ano ... during our lives, perhaps.

I still dream about it.

The purpose behind Kennon and I being assigned to that tiny atoll - [a narrow, flat, coconut tree-covered island just four hundred yards wide and two miles long; our village was one of four that dotted it’s Southern, or leeward coast] - our was to help prepare the village’s elementary school students for an important entrance exam to Tonga High School, 90 sea miles away. Everyone believed Tonga High School, on the Kingdom’s distant, main island, Tongatapu, was the country’s best and “only choice” high school. They wanted more outer island students to qualify on the exam, and the test’s English section was particularly challenging. So, that remote village requested a Peace Corps couple to live among them and teach in their elementary and middle schools. That was us. Teaching to the test was the goal.

The test day would arrive each October, and our kids needed to travel to the island group's test center, a four or five hour, open ocean sail to the village of Pangai on the island of Lifuka. The brightest sixth grade children on islands scattered throughout the

district would board village sailboats and travel to Pangai from different directions. Those children wore their informal "sea clothes" for the ocean journey; but their mothers had washed, starched and pressed their colorful school uniforms, and tucked them into woven baskets, which the children carried along for the important test day.

We accompanied our students on their voyage to that test, It was October, 1972, our first year in Tonga. Fifteen or twenty of us were crowded together on the deck of "Fakaului," the Wesleyan church's old sailboat. There were a dozen children, Tevita: the boat captain was at the helm, two or three women, one or two old men, Kennon, and me. The craft was a gaff-rigged, twenty seven foot, heavy, wooden sailboat. There was no engine, just sail power - two jibs forward, a mainsail - and heavy volcanic rocks from the islands of Kao and Tofua served as ballast below decks. There was no life saving gear. Peace Corps did not issue life jackets then.

It was a cool, almost cold, cloudy and breezy morning as we were shuttled in outrigger canoes from the sandy beach in front of our bamboo and thatched house to the Fakaului, anchored in the village lagoon. The wind was building, but it blew from the other, windward, side of the island. And, although it whistled through the beachside ironwood trees, our lee side of the island and the lagoon inside our reef, seemed calm. As we waited for the other passengers to be paddled out to the boat, we could look out to sea and make out Foa, the next island to the South, and another island called Nukunamo. Once all were on board, the captain and first mate hoisted the sails and we glided out of the lagoon, beyond the reef, into deep water with an increasing wind astern.

Even after we reached open ocean, we still could not see our destination: the village of Pangai on the island named Lifuka. It was too far over the horizon. An hour or so into the journey it became visible – but just a thin, grey line far in the distance. As we sailed beyond the "wind shadow" of our island, the increasing wind built larger and larger waves, and the heaving boat ride was more and more uncomfortable. Before long, the wind howled and we were either riding a wave crest or disappearing into a trough. I worried to myself: "this is a precarious situation."

The captain had shortened or "reefed" the Fakaului's sails, that is, decreased sail area by wrapping them round the boom or forestay. He must have known it would be a challenging trip, but he underestimated. All the villages in that Ha'apai island group are located on their islands' lee, the protected side of the islands, away from the prevailing wind. So, this "shadow of the island" was where our journey had begun, and the intensity of the wind on the open ocean had not been totally apparent from our lagoon.

Before long, hissing whitecaps and a significant swell raced at us from astern. The sails were let out on a full reach [out as far as they could go], the wind behind us. Strong gusts heeled the boat well over to starboard; sea water rushed over the gunwales drawing moans from the passengers, but Captain Tevita increased slack in the main sheet and the boat righted herself.

After two or three hours, the old Fakaului creaked and groaned as she pounded into on-coming swells. Sea spray exploded over the bow and back onto the passengers, who huddled under sheets and blankets. I stood on the port side, facing the bow, gripping the mast's stay. Our Tongan friends, devout Wesleyans, began to sing church hymns. Several prayed aloud to 'Otua [God] for deliverance from the angry sea. Just like today's Gospel - "Lord, don't you care if we drown?!" The first mate stood on the bowsprit, holding the forestay, shouting an ancient chant to the waves: "Peao!! To ki mu'a! To ki mui! Kataki, 'oua te ke to mai!!" "Waves!! Fall in front of us! Fall behind us! But don't fall on us!!" The deep-throated singing and praying increased.

Another hour passed. Some aboard were sea sick and vomited. I remained standing on the port side, mid-ships, swaying with the waves, tightly gripping the stay that ran to the top of the mast. In the boat's stern, the captain Tevita held the steering tiller and the main sheet – the line stretching from his helm to the boom and mainsail, adjusting that rope's tension to spill air from the sail when necessary, and running the line through a deck cleat.

But, then it happened. For some unknown reason, for just a moment, Captain Tevita temporarily double-cleated the sheet to attend to something on the port side of the helm. But, that was also the very second when a mighty gust filled the sail, and the boat heeled far to starboard. Tevita could not release the cleated sheet quickly enough to empty the sail, and the ship did not right herself. It tipped far to our right, to starboard, and continued until over we went. We capsized. The boat flipped to its right side and nearly 'turtled' upside down. With a great cry, all the children and adults, including Kennon, spilled into the sea, which was now in the sea, under water. The ocean immediately rushed through open hatches into the boat's hold. Below decks flooded quickly, submerging the ballast and cargo – rocks, and baskets of school uniforms, live chickens and squealing pigs, bunches of bananas and yams.

We were in serious trouble. I had fallen into the sea off the port/left side, and had to swim around the capsized boat to find Kennon among the screaming, gasping children and women. The only thing floating free was a hatch cover, and we couldn't stand on it, or even hold on, because it was heavy wood and it sank as soon as we use it. It wasn't going to bear any weight.

The boat sank quickly, just like the Titanic. Initially, the hull and the keel were above the surface, and could be a resting place for those floundering in the sea. All the children and adults would struggle to swim there and grab hold. But their combined weight would push the hull below the surface. Then, thirty feet away, the mast tip would reappear and everyone would try to swim there to hold on. That mast tip was last thing we saw disappear, go down under the waves. The Fakaului was gone, silently sinking down, down into the deep, and out of sight. Huge bubbles rose, belching to the surface.

The October air and huge waves were cold. The women and children wore coats and sweaters, now sodden and heavy, dragging them down. The only sounds were the

hissing of the white capping waves and the wailing of the children. The little girls were not able swimmers like the boys. Wild-eyed they cried for help, reaching for us.

I yelled: "Take your coats off... take off your clothes so you can float!! Vete ho'omou vala!!" But Tongans have a modest culture; and not many of them complied. I stripped down but I didn't think to tie off my pant's legs and make them into 'floaties' as we had learned years before in a YMCA camp lifesaving class. Kennon removed some clothes too. Many kids were clawing at us, trying to climb up on our shoulders, to reach air, as we tried our best to tread water. The struggling group began to be separated by the huge swells and cresting waves. We were either carried high up on a crest or roller coasted down into a deep wave trough from where we could only see the next approaching wave.

Kennon and I treaded water, stayed together. For a while I also tried to support a struggling, little girl named Vienna. But my head slipped underwater and I drank sea each time I pushed her up for air. I finally had to let her go in order to help Kennon. We never saw Vienna again. An old woman named Tae was wild-eyed, thrashing in the sea, when I saw her just after the capsiz. But now she just stared, dead-eyed, floating among us and then slipped under. An old man grabbed at Kennon, attempting to climb up on her and out of the water. He pulled her under. So, I pushed his chest away with my foot, pulling Kennon free. "Swim with me!" I gasped to him and the others.

All the while we were trying to get oriented and locate the closest island of Foa and attempt swimming to safety in that direction. But the strong wind and waves were now blowing toward us from Foa, making headway more than difficult. I told Kennon to flip onto her back, and hold her arms straight against my shoulders as I breast stroked above her—a lifesaving rescue method I sort of remembered. We were swallowing lots of sea water, choking. It grew quieter and quieter as the passengers drifted apart, the cries of some were distant now. I was sure we would lose everyone.

I don't know how long we struggled, an hour perhaps, swimming with great difficulty, slowly toward Foa, yelling over our shoulder, "This way, come this way!" to the few visible children and adults.

I thought our lives were over. We would surely drown. I was so very tired - trying to swim against the waves, holding Kennon up. We were ready to surrender to the inevitable when, just as we prepared to let go and slip under, the bow of a large motor launch came lurching through the swells toward us! Young Tongan men leaped into the sea and swam to us. With some difficulty they managed to haul us alongside. We were totally spent. Fastening lines under our arms, they pulled us aboard. The crew continued to search and search. They found others, here and there, still afloat, and plucked them from the sea too. Kennon and I lay on the wooden deck, gasping, crying, sick.

The Tongan boat crew hauled almost everyone onto that boat. There was no little Vienna. I had been holding her earlier as she floundered, but had to and pass her on to her mother. She was lost. Another young woman, Mele, was hauled aboard. The twenty

year old was limp, unresponsive, her eyes rolled back in her head. I was sure she was gone; but I attempted mouth to mouth CPR and chest compressions. As much as I tried, only bubbles and sea water gushed from her mouth and nostrils. I couldn't revive her. The old woman, Tae, was found still floating, and was hauled aboard too. But she was dead.

How in the world had that big motor launch come to rescue us? We were told later what had happened. A boy in a seaside school on the island of Lifuka was daydreaming, not following class, gazing out the window to sea. He had watched a tiny sail far out to sea; but then he noticed that the sail had disappeared. He told his teacher that a sail was there but now it was gone, maybe a boat was in trouble? So he jumped on his bicycle and pedaled as fast as he could go to the village of Pangai. There, docked in the little harbor, was a thirty foot long motor launch. The boat crew believed the boy's story, swung into action and plowed full throttle out through the waves. It must have taken them an hour to reach the capsized site.

Once they decided the numbers of rescued matched our recollection of those who had been aboard, minus little Vienna, the boat turned back and slowly ferried us to our destination, the Pangai harbor. The children shivered and cried, despite our attempts to comfort them. A crowd of islanders met the rescue boat on the dock and beach. The survivors were walked to a temporary shelter, which every outer island had in this district center. Tae's and Mele's bodies were carried there too.

We gently laid them on pandanas mats in the tin shelter, and covered them with tapa cloth. Evening came, and the eerie sound of wailing and hymn singing drifted out into the night. Dozens of islanders sat cross-legged around with the bodies. "OIAUE! OIAUE!" - the mourning cry of Tongans links all of the alphabet vowels together, and the result sounds like a heart wrenching petition to God: YAHWEY! YAHWEY! Later, Kennon and I drifted outside to stay with Pangai-based Peace Corps volunteers. But it was not a night for sleeping. We could hear our villagers and their Pangai relatives singing: an all-night vigil.

A red sun rose next morning: test day for the islands' children. The exam was not cancelled. Dozens of children lined up in their brightly-colored school uniforms at the test site school doors. They had prepared for the exam and were determined to do their best. Their mothers had sewed, washed and pressed their bright blue and orange and checkered dresses and shirts – a beautiful sight. But there were our village's kids too. They lined up with the others, despite all that had happened, willing to take the test. But they were still wearing their dirty, sea clothes. Their uniforms had gone down with the boat and with little Vienna. Watching them shuffle into the school, we stifled our sobs.

After the test, the motor launch and crew that had saved us chugged slowly along, taking us back to our island. Tae's and Mele's bodies were wrapped in tapa cloth, stowed below. We sat silently on deck with the other survivors. News traveled fast in Tonga via Radio station A3Z. The accident and loss of life report had been telegraphed down to the capitol, Nuku'alofa, and broadcasted to the entire nation the night of the

sinking. Three villagers were lost. National news. And so, when we reached the Ha'ano lagoon, all the villagers were waiting on the beach. Women had let their hair go wild, uncombed; and everyone was wearing black clothes and large, mourning mats from knee to chest, bound by coconut fiber rope. As our anchor dropped, sad singing rose up from the crowd on the beach. OIAUE!

The funeral was held in short order as there is no embalming on remote islands. Cemeteries on outer islands are near the beach, under iron woods trees. The tombs are covered with mounds of layered black coral and white coral chips, and topped by wooden frames from which flower garlands and decorative leaves are hung. Hundreds of our villagers silently gathered around the graveyard. Tae's and Mele's bodies, wrapped in tapa cloth, were carried on pallbearers' shoulders. Designated, thick-necked chiefs opened the tombs, following a ritual which must be hundreds of years old. First the coral and sand were removed. Below ground, thick coral slabs formed a crypt, which held the stacked remains of ancestors. Coconut ropes were tied to the top slab, enabling strong men to haul it aside, as a "speaking chief" chanted, invoking the ancient Spirits, "Tuku mai Latu! Tuku mai, Latu!!" He was asking for strength to open the tomb and slide the heavy slab.

Villagers held up a large, tapa cloth barrier, a "fence" of sorts, blocking our view of the decaying past. The big rock slowly slid open; a deep, grinding sound. The men pulled, and chanted, and pulled. Tae and Mele were lowered into the tomb where they would rest forever, atop their ancestors' bones. The chanting continued as the slabs were pushed shut. Then, we all sat silently under the ironwood trees. All was still. There was only the sound of the lapping waves, the surf far out on the reef, and the breeze whistling through the pine needles.

In that quiet, one of the chiefs - maybe it was our friend, Hiko, or old Vuni Pola, a huge man with coarse hair growing out of his ears - one of them leaned over and whispered to me in the Tongan language:

"Lousa, [Roger] if you and Kenoni had drowned, we would have buried you here too."

So. Was Jesus in the boat that day to calm that storm?

No, he wasn't. At least I didn't see him.

But, we had shared life and death with our villagers.

And, the Jesus who **connects** us all, forever and ever, has been in that memory with us, and with them, ever since. I still dream about it. Maybe he was in the boat... he was certainly in the people there.

Now and forever we are One. And today you are too.

Amen