

## **Faith and Boat Building**

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Genesis 6.11-22 Mark 6.45-52

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It has been a few weeks since I have shared worship with you here, and it's good to be back. We want to thank those who have preached and done pastoral care while I have been at a Sr. High camp, and then had some vacation: Pastors Eldon, Bob Stoppert, and Milt Stahl, and Don Woodward. We are blessed with many fine retired pastors and committed lay leaders in our congregation!

Today I want to talk about "faith and boat-building." I have actually been thinking about the connections between the two for a number of years. From a biblical perspective, I've thought about the connection more in theory than concretely ever since hearing about some of the great stories in the bible that involve boats, and traveling on water in boats: Noah and the ark; Jonah and the great fish; Jesus and the stilling of the storm; Paul and the shipwreck on the way to Rome. The Noah and Jesus scriptures will connect us to God's word; we also connect to God's will and way for us through our own life experience, which I'll also share today. I do that kind of personal sharing trusting that you understand that I'm not "lifting myself up", but as an illustration of how we all have dimensions in our own personal lives that have touchpoints with scripture, and through which our true place in God's world can become more real to us.

From a personal perspective, I became interested in boat building eight years ago, and from that interest, as well as my attention to God's word in the Bible, let me lift up three connections to our Christian faith. They are: 1) how we begin something, 2) what it requires of us, and 3) what the results will be.

First, the question of how we begin something, and the answer is that in everything significant, there is a complex and mysterious interplay between what is given to us, and what we choose. One could also say "accident" and "intention", or perhaps even better to say "grace" and "faith." Many of you have hobbies or crafts or art that is both incredibly specific, time-consuming, and also satisfying on a number of levels. It is always interesting to hear how we "get into" these things." I did not wake up one morning and just flat-out decide to build a boat. It was while on a family vacation to the coast of Maine that it happened. We went to a beach to have lunch and play in the water, and noticed a number of black teenage girls walking around in wetsuits—not the kind of thing one typically sees on a beach in Maine. Turned out, they were part of a program in which girls from the inner city of Boston spent three weeks building kayaks using only hand tools, then the next five weeks paddling up the coast of Maine. Isn't that a cool thing? And they were really doing it. Mary (my wife) said: "You should do that with Jesse (our son), then a teenager himself. And so we did, or rather, I did—Jesse ended up having no interest in the project.

How do we know when we begin something? There really is a complex interplay between what comes to us, and how we respond to it—or whether we even see it. Robert Fulghum said, "When the student is ready, the teacher appears." I have long been interested in hands-on building and repairing projects, including the total refinishing and rebuilding of our piano.

How are we open to God's call and claim? Some might say that growing up in a United Methodist minister's family predisposed me to go into the ordained ministry also, but we all know that every child is different, and that some children who grow up with every encouragement in the faith fall away, and we also know children who grew up with parents who were indifferent or even hostile to the faith who walked miles to church every week because they felt their lives to be blessed in amazing ways through the church family. And while many people can point to some particular meaningful decision points in their lives, the deeper reality is that God is always working on us, and every purposeful decision we make is kind of like the tip of an iceberg—unseen, but still massive and real.

Noah and the ark: we notice that God did not pick just anyone to build that ark—it was Noah, who could have gotten out of it had he just followed peer pressure and “done evil continually” like everyone else. Why did he decide to live an upright life? We do not know the answer to that. Why did Jesus call the disciples that he did call, and why did they respond? We know that there were some people that Jesus called who turned away, or who thought they were just too busy right then, but that when life settled down, they would certainly consider it. The Bible says some interesting things about timing, and invitation and openness: “Seek the Lord while he may be found” is one of them (Isaiah 55.6)

Second, what it requires of us. Building something by hand, especially something that takes so much time, has occurred to me to be taking a few steps back if all we looked at was an economic model of life. Henry Ford was the Michigan boy who really got the concept of “mass production” rolling, in which the complex process of building a car was broken down into thousands of single steps, that thousands of workers would do. Mass production is a far more efficient way to build something, so long as you are going to build thousands of them. We all benefit from the efficiencies that these production methods bring, and while we lament the loss of manufacturing jobs in this country, I am old enough to remember that when those jobs were plentiful, we did not necessarily think that we were living in God's kingdom. Those kinds of jobs typically are very boring because they are so repetitive, and each worker is separated from the satisfaction of the final product. Each worker tends to feel like, well, you know the cliché: “a cog in a machine.”

The difference has been described as the difference between the “workmanship of certainty,” and the “workmanship of risk.” From a factory production standpoint, we want to know exactly how things will turn out, so that we can make the outcome—quality of fit and finish for example, flawless. But with something hand-built, it is more difficult to control all the factors. There are just so many things that an amateur learns as they go, and also learns the “hard way” (after making a mistake!) Of course, our lives are just such a unique, hand-built affair also. We try, through educational systems and the like, to at least help each generation avoid the obvious mistakes and problems...that's what culture and civilization are about, largely, but we each still must pull it all together ourselves—or not! If I just wanted a kayak, for the cheapest price, I would not have built it myself. And that does not even factor in my time. If I could somehow measure that, then the boat I built would be the value of a decent car! But none of us has the option of just “buying” our own destiny, and life, and direction. Rufus Jones, the great Quaker

mystic, said this about that curious term: “A mystic is simply anyone who seeks to experience God first-hand.’ Directly, not just through the experiences of others.

Third, there’s the issue of what we get out of our faith, out of “the works of our hands,” as well as of our spirit. What are the results when we make a commitment to God in Christ, and then pour ourselves into it? We have the lofty goal set for us by Jesus, who said in his Sermon on the Mount, “You must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5.48). If Jesus had not been the one to say this, we could more easily dismiss it as too unrealistic. We are too aware of how our own “lips and lives” go in different directions, let alone what we hope, in our best selves to become, and what we notice is our actual behavior, to be too confident about this one. Yes, we believe in God’s grace to inspire us, lead us, transform us, but we notice that that grace does not compel us. I think I ended up with a nice looking boat, but here’s an interesting thing that happens that I did not anticipate as I built it: there is a fair amount of attention it attracts, and nice compliments. I’ve learned not to point out the various flaws that I know about—like the dog hairs that got embedded under the fiberglass (etc.). I know too much about the reality. Also, there’s a difference between the exterior, and the interior, the part that isn’t seen (hold up the hatch cover).

The founder of Methodism, John Wesley, struggled with this question of Christian perfection. For him, the door was opened to his true inner need on, you guessed it, a boat trip! It was while he was traveling to the English colony in Georgia in 1735 by sailing ship that he found out how little he trusted God. This is not the kind of thing that is comfortable for any of us to find out, but it helped him to grow into an authentic, genuine faith, eventually. Here’s a reminder to us living in “Coast Guard City, USA”: there was not Coast Guard back then, no radio, no helicopters, no lifeboats even. When those relatively small sailing ran into storms and trouble on the open ocean, they were literally “on their own.” And they ran into a storm. John Wesley, our hero, was terrified—and he knew it. We might be able to hide all kinds of things from our awareness, but we cannot hide the fear of death from ourselves. But also on board that ship was a group of Moravians, Protestant Christians from German, who seemed perfectly calm, to the point where they were singing hymns through the storm.

Boat building and faith...the more obvious thing that Noah did was build a boat; what we remember him for is building a boat, but the most important thing he built was a **future**.

The Christian Way, the Christian life, living as though the God revealed in Jesus, is like building any thing by hand: it is time-consuming, it is hard, but in the end, the most worth while thing we will do. We are called to be “co-creators” with God, of a preferred future, and of a world of meaning. We are the only creatures who have this invitation and blessing. There are no short-cuts, there is no mass production, we are not just consumers of someone else’s struggles. But we can support one another, and encourage one another, and inspire one another, and as we do, we trust that the Spirit of Jesus, the heart of Jesus, will eventually become our heart, and our Spirit, as well.