

Journey Beyond the Familiar

Isaiah 6:1-11, Psalm 138, Luke 5:1-11

Church of the Good Shepherd- Nashua, NH

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I first fell in love with Brendan late at night in a Catholic retreat center. The door to my monastic cell of a room had a stained glass insert, and in mine was a picture of St. Brendan, the patron saint of sailors. Late at night, the hall light would shine through the deep reds of Brendan's cloak and the cobalt blue of the sea behind him. I would drift off to sleep awash in the sea of color that swam through the room; wondering about this unfamiliar Saint, dreaming of distant journeys and undiscovered sacred places.

Brendan, it turns out, is one of the Big Wig saints of Ireland, and is known as the "navigator" or "voyager." He was a restless soul, who set out from the coast of Ireland in a small, wooden, rudderless boat on a journey to find "the Island promised to the Saints." Guided by an angel, Brendan and his companions traveled for seven years, going from island to island. Brendan and his fellow monks sailed in circles, visiting the same islands over and over, searching, longing to find that promised place. Their journey was grounded in the rhythms of the liturgical calendar, and each Easter they celebrated the Eucharist on the back of a whale. (Remember, the Irish are telling this story.)

Who doesn't love a saint who courageously yields to holy currents, allowing them to take him on a journey of deep transformation? Christine Valters Paintner says that St. Brendan is the archetype of the Pilgrim. She writes: "The Pilgrim is one who actually courts holy disruption, seeks to get lost, and opens oneself up to the strangeness of being in a foreign land, knowing that all of this discomfort will break one open in new ways."

You've heard me quote my friend Jerry before: "There is always turbulence at the boundaries." Meaning that whenever we transition from one thing to another, there is always a time of being unsettled. Sacred journeys always involve. Change of any kind, chosen or unbidden, for better or for worse, involves disruption. Both the reading from Isaiah and from Luke are about the turbulence that comes from crossing from one place to another, crossing the boundary of change in the pilgrim's journey of transformation.

Isaiah's vision in the temple occurs against the backdrop of immense societal change. It is the year that King Uzziah died. Uzziah was a king who ruled Judah for over 50 years, who was considered good and faithful until his pride and the "winner

effect" got the better of him. His reign ended with Uzziah suffering the disgrace of leprosy and being barred from the temple. The socio-political context of Isaiah was in disruption, and Isaiah experiences his vision in a place where the very threshold, or boundary, was vibrating with change. Isaiah offers himself as one who will step out into this uncertainty and follow God's leading into who knew where.

Luke's gospel tells a story of the disciples at the boundary, a time of socio-economic-political upheaval, the setting here is the fishing industry that is under the thumb of Rome's governance. Here, at this turbulent boundary, Jesus issues the call to follow him through uncertainty from the Kingdom of Rome into the kingdom of God .

Jesus directing the disciples to "put out into the deep" wasn't just a suggestion about the best place to catch fish. It was a call to step out of one's comfort zone, to take the road less traveled, to risk the uncertainty of the rocking boat and untamable seas, to step out in trust. There is turbulence at the boundaries as we move from where we are, to where we will be next.

There are times when we find ourselves "out into the deep" **through no choice** of our own. The medical diagnosis that blows in on the icy winds of the grave, the loss of our beloved that leaves us feeling like we have been riven in half, the crisis that rocks the boat...

And sometimes we **choose** to push out boat "out into the deep" the job change, leaving a place or relationship that restricts our growth, getting married, or just following the curiosity of learning that leads us into a new calling...

Whether chosen or imposed, we find ourselves "out into the deep," in over our heads, disoriented by the vertiginous waves. Our boat seems so small and rudderless, and the sea so wide.

That the spiritual journey involves disorientation, feeling lost, or being carried along by currents beyond our control may not feel like good news when crossing into uncertainty. It is then that the prayer of St. Brendan comes to mind:

"Lord, help me to journey beyond the familiar and into the unknown. Give me the faith to leave old ways and break fresh ground with You."

As a congregation, you are in the midst of a great sea change in your collective journey to find a new pastor. You have been called to go "out into the deep." And I know that many of you are enduring the turbulent seas of your own personal journeys of change as well. Christine Paintner says of these times of transition:

"The heart of the voyage asks us, what needs to change for the "Land Promised to the Saints' to be recognized?" And "Are we able to stay present through moments

of solace, ease, and joy, as well as the anxiety, fear, and sometimes terror that comes when we let go of all that is familiar to follow our heart's calling?"

Jesuit priest Teilhard de Chardin said that in these times of transition, we are invited to "give Our Lord the benefit of believing that God's hand is leading you," and to "accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete."

Like Brendan, we are buoyed up by our community of faith and nourished by our spiritual practices. As we push out into the deep on this journey of trust, as we live bravely into the uncertainty of following Christ, we pray with St. Brendan the voyager: "Christ of the mysteries, I trust you to be stronger than each storm within me. I will trust in the darkness and know that my times, even now, are in your hand."

So may it be. AMEN