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Dangerous Crossings

Mark 4:35

We all make journeys which take us into uncharted territory. I still remember vividly the long drive I made from Lawrence, Kansas to Princeton, New Jersey in 1970 to begin my seminary studies. I was leaving behind the young woman to whom I was engaged and going to a place where I did not know anyone. The two days of driving were an anxious time. I knew I was entering a momentous time of transition in my life. I was motivated by a strong sense of calling to pursue the possibility of ministry. But I did not understand very much about the educational or professional challenges that lay ahead. I was making an important crossing knowing very little of what I would find on the other side. More than ever before I realized how much I needed to trust that God would show the way.

In the 17th chapter of 1 Samuel we find a shepherd boy named David making that kind of crossing. He was a small town kid who just happened onto the scene of a great crisis. The Israelites were in a military confrontation with the Philistines. Someone was needed to line up against the fiercest warrior of the Philistines. King Saul and his soldiers were petrified at the sight of Goliath. They had never seen a warrior huge enough to wear 220 pounds of armor. Saul knows very well that he has no defense against Goliath. There is no anti-Goliath weapon in his arsenal.

When the shepherd boy stepped forward to offer his services, Saul did not ask too many questions. He understood that his options were very limited. He tried to put the best possible face on an unfortunate situation by loaning the boy his armor. David could at least be made to look like a soldier even if he could not fight like one. But at this point David did a very unusual thing. He rejected the conventional approach to soldiering. He refused to go out in Saul's armor. He tried it on but it didn't feel right. Instead, he did what he knew how to do. He had learned how to fight with a sling and stones to protect his sheep in the hills.

When David went out to fight Goliath, the giant warrior ridiculed him for coming unarmed. He said, "Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks (1 Samuel 17:43)?" But David answered, "You come to me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts (1 Samuel 17:45)." David chooses to fight without armor as an expression of faith that God will show him the way. He has learned that in the most dangerous crossings of his life he must travel with God. In the end there is no other security.

It is this truth that Jesus is teaching his disciples in the 4th chapter of Mark. It is the end of a long day. Jesus is worn out from dealing with the crowds that have come to him for help. All of the disciples are in need of a rest. It is then that Jesus looks at the boat and says, "Let's go across to the other side (Mark 4:35)." It would be easy to assume that Jesus is talking about a relaxing evening cruise across the lake. That would seem like an appropriate way to unwind after a hard day. But that's not what Jesus means. On the other side of the lake is the Decapolis. It is the center of Roman influence in Palestine. It is a symbol of Roman tyranny. He is inviting the disciples to go to a place of intense conflict. This is a journey into the chaos of their time.

Mark tells us that they make this journey without any special preparation. He writes, "They took him with them in the boat, just as he was (Mark 4:36)." They go without armor. They go without a ministry plan or a political strategy. They go not knowing what awaits them on the other side. They go with the understanding that they must trust that God will show them the way.

The nature of Jesus' ministry has been described by Kate Layzer in these words: Jesus' ministry is one dangerous crossing after another, starting with his baptism. The moment the waters close over his head, the moment God's rushing Spirit meets and merges with his, his path through the world becomes one of confrontation; confrontation between entrenched interests and the in-breaking kingdom; confrontation between the way things are and the way God means them to be. The unclean spirits don't want their boat rocked. Neither do the authorities. But the Spirit of the Lord is upon Jesus. Rocking the boat is what he's come to do.¹

The disciples learn that to go with Jesus is to go directly into the storm. They have to learn to live with conflict and uncertainty. But they also learn that with Jesus there is peace in the midst of the storm. The God who goes with us through the dangerous crossings is the God who leads us home.

This church was founded 174 years ago by people who were willing to make the dangerous crossings with Jesus. They believed that Springfield needed an abolitionist church. It is very difficult for us today to understand what it meant to be an abolitionist church in 1835. Today we are all abolitionists but that is not how it was in 1835. Most white people either supported slavery or saw it as an evil that could not be ended. The abolitionists were the extremists who refused to compromise on this issue. The founders of this church were willing to go to the center of the most bitter conflict that has ever divided our nation. They believed this was exactly where Jesus wanted them to be.

One of the most prominent charter members of this church was a man named Erastus Wright. Wright was born in Bernardstown, Massachusetts and came to Sangamon County in 1821. He was a school teacher, county commissioner of schools, and a land agent. He was a frequent client of Abraham Lincoln. He delighted his students with the trained elk that he rode or used to pull his wagon.²

Wright was one of the leading abolitionists in central Illinois.³ He signed Elijah Lovejoy's call for an anti-slavery convention at Upper Alton, Illinois in 1837. He was active in the Illinois Anti-Slavery Society. He was one of the organizers of the Underground Railroad in Illinois. Wright never shied away from the conflict over slavery. But he was also a man who experienced peace in the midst of the storm. He practiced piety and generosity, offering tremendous encouragement to the leaders of this church.

Westminster's church records include a letter written by Wright to his pastor, Albert Hale. It is dated 1 January 1847 and reads:

Reverend A. Hale, Beloved Pastor:

In token of regard for your kindness and faithful Christian labors in former days, and self denial in times of high speculation, your friend matures his long speculation design and now presents, as a New Year's Gift, a house and lot for a temporary home for yourself and the little family the Lord has given you.

Trusting they may all have a better House—"a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."

Enclosed please find deed duly acknowledged.

Yours affectionately,
Erastus Wright⁴

This gift became the home of Albert Hale and his family for the next 44 years. But Wright also meant for the gift to be a symbol of God's faithfulness. He understood that the God who goes with us through the dangerous crossings is also leading us safely home.

Footnotes

1. Kate Lazzer, *Christian Century*, June 16, 2009, page 18.
2. Lincoln represented Wright in at least thirty legal cases (*They Belong to the Ages*, pages 149-150).
3. Richard E. Hart, "Lincoln's Springfield," Newsletter of the Abraham Lincoln Association, Summer 2006, page 1.
4. Second Presbyterian Church Session minutes, 1 January 1847.