

Space: the final frontier. These are the voyages of the starship Enterprise. Its continuing mission: to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no one has gone before.

Faith: The Final Frontier ~ To Seek Out New Life and New Worlds

MATTHEW 14:22-33 (NRSV) *Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. ²⁷But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."* ²⁸Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." ²⁹He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" ³¹Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" ³²When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

There's another story in Acts 9:43ff: Simon Peter was in Joppa, in the home of his friend, Simon the Tanner, for a little R&R—to bask in the sea breeze and let his mind, soul and body heal. He was napping on the sun deck up on the roof, and dreamed of a sheet being let down out of heaven. The sheet opened up and there were all kinds of animals, and a voice said, "Rise, Peter, kill and eat."

And Peter responded, "No, I'm kosher. Nothing unclean has touched my lips."

And the voice said, "What I have called clean, don't you call unclean." And the sheet went back up into heaven, and Peter woke up.

Simon's wife was downstairs fixing dinner, and the smells were wonderful, and Peter dozed off again. Same dream: "Rise, Peter, kill and eat." "No, I'm kosher. Nothing unclean has touched my lips." "What I have called clean, don't you call unclean." The sheet goes back up into heaven and Peter woke up.

The smells from the kitchen were getting to him, but he dozed a third time. And here comes that sheet again, and this time there's a big ol' Virginia ham just dripping with honey and cloves... But Peter won't eat. "I'm kosher. Nothing unclean has touched my lips." "What I have called clean, don't you call unclean."

And Simon's wife woke him up. "There are two Italian soldiers downstairs asking for you."

Here are two Italian soldiers standing at the front door of Simon's house, and they say, "Our master Cornelius is a God-fearing man, and he wants you to come and tell him about Jesus." And Peter remembered the dream: "What I have called clean, don't you call unclean."

And so Peter went with the soldiers to Caesarea, and preached in a Gentile's living room, and witnessed the Holy Spirit coming down upon a house full of uncircumcised, unbaptized Gentiles. Maybe you know the story. It ends with Peter declaring: "God does not prefer one ethnic group over another."

To appreciate this story you need a little background. Last month the world observed Yom Hashoah—a remembrance of the Holocaust, perhaps the single most horrible manifestation of racism in human history. The irony is that the people who suffered that horror were the descendants of a people who had institutionalized racism into their political and cultural and religious identity. To put it bluntly, Simon Peter was a racist.

In his world there were four ways to become ceremonially unclean and therefore unfit to worship God: (1) there were the dietary laws, (2) coming in contact with anything dead, (3) coming in contact with a sexual or menstrual emission, and (4) coming in contact with a Gentile.

Peter's values and expectations regarding people had been corrupted by the religion that had infected his faith. But God came to him and enabled him to "seek new life and new civilizations."

Mark Buchanon writes: "The Tuesday night prayer meeting at Brooklyn Tabernacle felt like skydiving into a tornado, exhausting and exhilarating all at once. I'd read about the meeting in Pastor Jim Cymbala's book *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire*, but nothing prepared me for the event itself: 3,500 God-hungry people storming heaven for two hours.

"Afterward, my friend and I went out to dinner with the Cymbalas. In the course of the meal, Jim turned to me and said, 'Mark, do you know what the number one sin of the church in America is?' I wasn't sure, and the question was rhetorical anyhow. 'It's not the plague of internet pornography; and it's not that the divorce rate in the church is roughly the same as society at large.

"It's that pastors and leaders are not on their knees crying out to God, 'Bring us the drug-addicted, the prostitutes, the destitute, the gang leaders, those with AIDS; the people nobody else wants, whom only you can heal, and let us love them in your name until they are whole.'"

Buchanon said, "I had no response. I was undone. He had laid me bare, exposed my fraudulence. I had never prayed, not once, for God to bring such people to my church. So I went home and began to cry out for "those nobody wanted."

"And darned if God didn't bring them. And then I found out why nobody wants them: they're messy and costly and dirty. They swear at you, lie to you, steal from you. Worse, they make you love them, and then often break your heart."

In the 1996 movie, *Entertaining Angels*, Dorothy Day is praying before a

life-size crucifix. "Why," she asks Jesus, "did you have to wear such a revolting disguise, covered in vomit, smelling of urine, dressed in rags, cursing?"

In Las Vegas our food pantry ministry served almost 450 families every month. In addition, I averaged seeing six people every day asking for help: everything from food to medicine to gasoline to eye glasses to bus tickets... and most of them were "repeat customers." And virtually all of them bore the marks of crack cocaine. You could see the scars and bruises and broken teeth of physical abuse.

People nobody else wants: New Life and New Civilizations.

OK. We're talking extremes here. Our church is not on Smith Street in Brooklyn; it's a few blocks from the Las Vegas Strip. Most of the people I counsel struggle with sins that, for the most part, have minimal social consequences. They get angry too quickly, or gossip, or run up their credit card. Problems, yes. Sins, indeed. But sins they more or less can manage on their own—if they really want to.

Ministry under those circumstances is like being in a boat when the wind kicks up. It's comforting to know Jesus is somewhere nearby, but you can tough it out alone. Your basic nautical skills will get you through it.

But that doesn't work with the pimps and crackheads I encountered in Las Vegas. With them, ministry is like being called out of the boat to walk on the water: we've never been here before, there's no three-step technique, and unless Jesus is with us, ready to catch us when we fall, we'll sink all the way to the bottom.

So, why am I telling you all this? We live in Atchison, Kansas. I've been here six weeks and haven't had a single person in my office asking for financial aid. I haven't encountered a single "crackhead."

But within sight of this building there are people nobody else wants. Kids, in your school there are people nobody wants, aren't there? You know who they are.

You see, that's the thing about following Jesus. Sometimes he leads where we don't want to go, to work with people nobody else wants. Sometimes he calls, "Get out of the boat."

Maybe *you* thought there'd be smooth sailing with Jesus. You thought that, with Jesus in the boat, there'd be no storm, no waves, no fear. But almost every page of Mark's gospel puts Jesus in the center of a storm. When Jesus is around, the wind picks up, the waves bang against the side of the boat; there's trouble. .

One of my favorite posters is a photo of a beautiful sailing ship. The captions says, "A ship in harbor is safe; but that is not what a ship is built for."

In the story in Mark, when Jesus called Peter to walk on the water, there was no problem with the waves—until Peter took his eyes off Jesus.

The Good News is that we've still got the boat. The better news is that, even

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in "strange new worlds," among "new life and new civilizations," we don't need the boat, as long as we keep our eyes on Jesus.