The Load-Out
Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 85:8-13
Reading from the Gospels: Matthew 14:22-33

"Now the seats are all empty … Let the roadies take the stage … Pack it up and tear it down…" Do you think Jesus may have been channeling a little Jackson Browne after feeding that crowd of (what?) at least 10-12,000? I think he may have. As the disciples and volunteers were gathering up the leftover food and neatening up the grassy field so as not to leave behind an environmental disaster, don't you think the space had the feel of a concert venue after the show? "They're the first to come and the last to leave … Working for that minimum wage … They'll set it up in another town."

Do you know the song, or has it been relegated to the dark recesses of the playlist on the oldies station? *The Load-Out*, composed by Jackson Browne back in 1977. It's a tribute song reflecting the life of a musician and his road crew touring from city to city, concert to concert. The roar of the crowd with the last note of the encore has given way to the sound of slamming doors and folding chairs and creaking dollies as the crew takes down the light trusses and rolls the amps out to the truck. "We gotta drive all night … And do the show in Chicago … Or Detroit, I don't know … We

do so many shows in a row … And these towns all look the same." And in that space between the encore and the Interstate, you know any artist has to be spent and exhausted after the intensity of a show, but the energy of the crowd lingers in the form of adrenaline mixed with the passion that created the art in the first place. "But when that last guitar's been packed away … You know that I still wanna play … So just make sure you got it all set to go … Before you come for my piano."

In the same way, Jesus had to be exhausted and spent at the end of yet another incredibly taxing day in an increasingly anxious environment. Yet, with the lingering energy of the now departed crowd, his mind racing with images from the day and the repeating loop of questions, concerns, plans, doubts, and nerves circling from his cortex to his frontal lobe and back, again and again, we know sleep won't come easy for Jesus this night.

Just look at the stories that precede our text today. Jesus has just been told about the execution of John the Baptist by Herod. So not only is Jesus processing the gravity of that loss, but he is also cognizant of its implications for his own ministry and the risks he will face going forward. Then, his effort to carve out some time for respite is foiled when social media blows

up with the details of his location, and what was supposed to be a retreat suddenly becomes a First Century version of Woodstock, a spontaneous gathering of thousands, only one of whom brought so much as a picnic basket to a decidedly rural spot where the nearest *Bojangles* was at least half a day's travel away. Matthew says that when Jesus looked out on the huge crowd, "He had compassion for them and cured their sick," and somehow he also managed to cater the whole event, left no one hungry, and had enough left over to supply the local soup kitchen for a week.

Perhaps now, Jesus could find some space to be alone to pray and process. He really couldn't put it off any longer. Sometimes, getting away, finding a space offering some form of solitude ceases to be optional and becomes a necessity. C.S. Lewis surmised that, "We live, in fact, in a world starved for solitude, silence, and private: and therefore starved for meditation and true friendship."

Never has that been more true than in this era of online captivity. It's frightening to consider how blithely we ignore the evidence of how our minds have been mystified and mastered by algorithms that increasingly shape our beliefs, dependencies, emotions, and fears, literally rewiring our

brains to the point of governing the way we think, who we follow, who we hate, who we accept, what will trigger our rage. Have you pondered the lordship of the algorithm in our lives? Perhaps you've had this experience. Someone you've known for a long time says something so outrageous, so far out of the norm, so far from the character of the person you met long ago … and you know, you know that if the subject had come up ten years ago, there is no way this same person would have said anything like it. It leaves you speechless. Your mind is blown. You're thinking, where did this come from? Who is this person and what happened?

And subsequently, you are doing your obligatory scroll through Facebook or Instagram, and you see the post of another friend from a completely separate compartment of your life, someone who has zero connections to the first friend, and they're saying the exact same outrageous thing, using the exact same phrases and intonations … And you're thinking — Wait a minute … two people … zero connections … zero overlapping of lives … same script … same phrasing … same anger — And you know, they've found the same tunnel and they are all in! What has become a regular occurrence in our house is that Donna or I will read something someone posted and we'll look at one another wide-eyed and speechless,

our silent way of acknowledging that those folks have been lured into a tunnel, and we don't think they're coming back. Reprogrammed, Rewired, and mastered by the lords of the algorithm.

Have you ever been to the US Botanic Garden in DC? Fascinating, beautiful and glorious array of flowers, plants, trees, and perennials from around the globe. Last week we were wending our way around the solarium, and between the displays, branches and trellises, were various benches and ledges, from which you could ponder the flora surrounding you.

Touring at the same time was a large group of young folks, obviously on an organized trip. There were probably six or seven of them scrunched together on each three-person bench, but they weren't really interacting or even acknowledging each other. To a person, their eyes were laser focused on the screens of that sacred idol of this era — the smartphone. And you know it's not just the young folks. You'd see the same thing among commuters on a subway or folks in the waiting room at the doctor's office. But it was a powerful object lesson for me there at the Botanic Garden in the solarium — The whole world *(wide)* … your world *(narrow, prescribed*

by an algorithm). Do you know who is writing your script … organizing your thoughts … manipulating your fears … informing your rants? It may not be who you think.

Jesus knew that. Jesus understood how essential it was to step away from the crowd, the voices, the static, the unsolicited advice, the politics, the relentless pace going from town to town. Retreat. Re-center. Reframe. Restore. Recreate. Refocus on the one voice through whom he could and should always interpret all other voices.

The Pauline author of Ephesians knew what Jesus would be pursuing when he sent the road crew on ahead to the next town and went up alone into the mountains to pray. Ephesians phrases it like this: “Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not become partners with them; for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord.”

Jesus knew the wisdom of the Proverb: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.” “Trust in

the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths." Why should an algorithm have more influence over how you think than the God who made you, knows you, and wants to walk with you on your way through this crazy world? So, Jesus went up the mountain to pray. What about you?

Now, Jesus would not stay on the mountain. It was a retreat, not an escape. It was a place to be alone with God. What does James say? *If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.* Yet, as important as it is to be alone with God, it is just as important to go with God back into the world to serve God there. Jesus had said, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out." There was a purpose. There was a mission. This is a Redeemer sent into the world, a world that needed and needs his presence, his character, his framework of compassion and mercy. Yet, those mountaintop moments alone with God were critical, a chance to renew and fine tune that ability to discern the voice of the Lord, so that upon re-entering this world's chaos, Jesus could distinguish the voice of God from all the other voices coming at him.

Jesus didn't reach the boat before the disciples had cast off to sail to the next town, but Jesus knew he'd get to where he was going on time, because … well … he was Jesus after all, and I suppose one of the perks of being God's Son was possessing a few more travel options than most. Just strap on some Chaco's and hike across the sea.

Like the roadies for Jackson Browne, the disciples were getting a head start toward the next town, an advance team preparing for Jesus' arrival, but Brad Panovich was somewhere standing in front of a green screen, pointing to the latest radar image showing why the disciples' boat was going nowhere fast. "The boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them."

Now, we know that the Gospel is not just the tale of seafaring seekers from long ago. The Gospel is just as much about us, so what are we today supposed to see in this boat of waterlogged Jesus roadies struggling against the wind and a stormy sea?

Have you ever worshiped in a church where a boat is depicted in stained glass? An arched ceiling supported with prominent wooden beams that you find in many churches, intentionally gives you the impression of

sitting under the overturned hull of a boat. In fact, the traditional name for the area where worshipers sit is *nave*, from the Latin *navis* which means *ship*, and is also the root for words like *navy* and *navigate*. Think of the rich imagery of boats in scripture — the ark in Genesis, the ship in Jonah, the boat in our text today, Paul's adventures and misadventures on the sea.

A boat is both a refuge and a conveyance, protection from the dangers of the open water and a way to get from point A to point B in a world where ¾ of the surface area is water. A refuge from a stormy sea, a gathering space for people taking a journey together, a space that is taking you someplace together. So, it's not a stretch to understand why the image of a boat has borne significant meaning for Christ's church through the ages.

Well, those first disciples, Jesus' roadies, were out there battling wind and waves, and to look in their eyes and feel the pounding in their chests, it was obvious that the waves were winning. But what is this? Who is this walking toward them? Having seen one too many M. Night Shyamalan movies, those waterlogged disciples were freaking out until a voice came to them — "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid" — powerful words that are so

impactful when the Divine comes to remind God's children who they are and whose they are.

"Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Sometimes, that's all it takes; all that is needed — just that *Oh yeah* moment, that reminder that we do not face our fears alone; remembering we are claimed and sustained by God throughout the storm. "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Well, Peter the Impetuous, like a child who sees a neighbor's shiny new electric bike and is just bustin' to get a turn to ride it, sees Jesus walking on the water and is squealing, *Me too! Me too!* I have to think Jesus was subtly smirking when he told Peter to give it his best shot. And can't you see Peter struttin' like the big jock on campus, right up until he sees that swell of a big wave bearing down on him. Immediately arrogance is replaced by terror as the water begins to swallow him. "Lord, save me!" Matthew reports, "Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?' When they got into the boat, the wind ceased."

Much has been made of this text, implying that if Peter had just had a little more faith, why, he could have hopscotched across the Sea of Galilee

or rollerbladed across the Atlantic Ocean, but I'm not thinking Peter's lead feet represent the doubt to which Jesus is referring. It wasn't that Peter couldn't walk on the water. No one can. You or I step out of the boat without a ski, a tube, or a decent breast stroke, we're going down. Jesus doesn't intend for us to walk on water. No, I suggest that the doubt for which Jesus was calling Peter out is in the demand, "If it is you, command me to come to you…" Remember what Jesus has just said, "Take heart, it is I…" Jesus comes to them in their distress, and Peter wants more than a photo ID.

And Jesus wasn't only coming for Peter, anyway. Jesus was coming to the boat, i.e., Jesus was coming to the church. Don't want to sink? Don't leave the boat … don't leave the community. What would Jesus say, *"Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."* Remember, the boat, the church, is both refuge and conveyance, a place to gather in the presence of God apart from the chaos, a place to learn and grow and worship together; and a conveyance that will take us into the purpose God has for us in this often stormy and chaotic world.

O Holy Spirit, who did brood
Upon the waters dark and rude,

And bid their angry tumult cease,
And give for wild confusion peace;
O hear us when we cry to Thee
For those in peril on the sea.

God has brought us together so that we may know God's presence and listen for God's word and sail forward to reflect God's peace in a stormy world. Amen.