

The “Bon Voyage” Moment

*And Jesus said to them, “Follow me . . .”
Immediately (Peter and Andrew) left their nets and followed him.
Immediately (James and John) left the boat and their father, and followed him.
(Matthew 4:19a, 20, 22)*

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the 19th Sunday after Pentecost, **September 30, 2018**
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Let’s begin with a satellite image of the Sea of Galilee. About midway along the western coastline you see what might be described as a cloud of white. That is the city of Tiberias, established about 20 A. D. when Jesus would have been about 25 years old. Named for the Roman emperor Tiberius, the city would become the political and religious center of Jewish life in the Galilee for the next thousand years.

Rich in Jewish history, Tiberias is the major city on the Galilee yet today, and is our Galilean home in my pilgrimages to the Holy Land. I look forward to being back at the Gai Beach Hotel in March.

John’s gospel, in chapter 6, calls this body of water the Sea of Tiberias. The sea is 14 miles long (roughly the distance between the Main Gate and East Gate of the Village) and 8 miles wide at its widest point.

At 700 feet below sea level, the Galilee is the lowest fresh water lake in the world. Note that its shape is like a harp. The Hebrew word for harp is *kinor*, which is the reason for a third name of this sea, the Lake of Kinneret, the Harp. From the harp come vibrations . . . Good Vibrations . . . sounds rippling outward into the world.

Perhaps some of you are just now are humming, “*Good, good, good . . . Good*”



Vibrations.” The Beach Boys! I suppose you could say today’s text asks us to consider the New Testament’s Beach Boys, two sets of brothers, Peter and Andrew, and James and John.

The bulk of Jesus’ ministry occurred along the northern shore of this sea, where some of the best-known moments in Jesus’ ministry happened, such as the Sermon on the Mount and the Feeding the Multitudes. Equally recognizable is the event we focus on today, the calling of the fishermen to become “*fishers of people,*” the first wave-notes of grace from the Harp.

The Call Jesus extended to these two sets of beach brothers was very simple . . . *Follow me.* So, my subject this morning will be very simple. I offer no complexities to contemplate, nor mysteries deeply to ponder. This morning I take aim at an essential component of faith, a concept so simple the smallest child has no difficulty understanding. I want to stress this morning that the core of faith is nothing other than the essence of Jesus’ Call . . . “*Follow me.*” Christianity is really that simple.

In this scene from the Galilee we see the Christian life at its most basic level. One hears a Call and sets out to Follow. Whether or not one is inclined to engage the intellectuals of the faith, to dive into its sacred texts and its profound mysteries, or to meditate one’s way toward a spiritual ecstasy, it matters not. The essential core of what it means to be a Christian is in no way diminished by the lack of these things. One has set forth to follow. It is enough. The faith is in the following.

I invite you this morning to think upon two very simple questions. The first is, at what point, for you, did your faith journey begin? , What was YOUR Bon Voyage moment? Can you pinpoint the moment you embarked on the journey of faith? You may find it surprising that some pastors of a much more fundamentalist stripe can see it as their calling to invite church members seeking to gain “assurance” of their salvation to answer that question. One obstacle to attaining “Blessed Assurance,” it may be suggested, is the lack of one’s ability to pinpoint the Bon Voyage moment of their conversion, thus conjuring doubt as to the authenticity of their faith.

To be sure, those whose faith has been worked out in Methodism or another of the mainline denominations may be surprised to discover that it’s not uncommon in the fundamentalist milieu in which my own preaching began to be in church services where it seemed the pastor’s theme is on the order of “*five reasons you’re probably not a Christian even though you thought you were one when you dressed to come to church this morning.*”

Decades ago, I was that pastor, taught to lead Christians to probe their faith for authenticity. The aim was for struggling, self-doubting Christians to question their faith so that they might seek an authentic conversion. “*Today I feel something like I’ve never felt before. Perhaps I was never really a Christian at all. I’ve been in church all my life but perhaps this sermon, this day, is the true ‘Bon Voyage’ moment of my journey, so that nothing before this day counts.*”

It is possible to confuse each new adventure along the Way with a new embarking on the journey, a new “*Bon Voyage*” moment. “*Wow! I’ve learned something new today. I was growing tired in my walk, backslidden, feelings of guilt emerging. Today, though, I feel refreshed spiritually.*”

Perhaps, before today, I just thought I was on the journey, but was on the wrong path. Now, at last, I think I am on the right path. I think I've now, at last, authentically commenced the journey. THIS must be my true Bon Voyage moment."

It's possible in one's faith journey to happen upon something so fresh and exciting that one begins to question the authenticity of previous experiences. This is why I think many, if not most, adult professions of faith made by individuals who grew up in church might better be described as re-dedications of one's faith commitment. I suspect that, in most of these cases, they are merely confusing an exciting spot on the journey with the commencing of the journey. I've helped many in my early ministry to pile up Bon Voyage moments.

That thought leads to the second question this morning. Is the "*Bon Voyage*" moment really that important? Some people can share dramatic accounts of how they were converted to the Christian faith, soul-stirring moments when their lives were dramatically interrupted by an infusion of the grace of God in a Damascus Road sort of experience, a clear U-turn in their life. I suspect that's not most of us.

One man, after hearing several accounts of those who could pinpoint the very moment, the very sermon, the stanza of the hymn during the invitation, said a bit hesitantly, "*You know, I can't remember when I wasn't a Christian. I've been a Christian from my earliest childhood, from the very first.*"

My guess is most in this sanctuary hear that with a nod of understanding. We are Methodists, after all, and such language suits us fine. Perhaps there are others, though, with more fundamentalist influences shaping in their faith, would hear those words with a dose of skepticism. "*No one can forget that experience! How can anyone be sure they are 'saved' unless there is a moment that stands out as uniquely life-transforming?* There was a time early in my ministry that I would have thought along those lines, questioning that man's faith.

When I arrived at Friendship Baptist Church in Clarendon 43 years ago, in 1975, my very first pastorate, there was a sign as you crossed the White River. It said, *Home of Dr. Margaret Moore Jacobs*. Born in 1901, she contracted tuberculosis and survived, becoming a Presbyterian author on spiritual matters, but also authored books on subjects ranging from antiques to flower gardening. Her home on the White River was known as the *Dear Little House*, now the *Dear Little House Museum*. When I arrived in 1975 she was yet living there.

One of my church members reported to me that they had heard Dr. Jacobs make a similar comment. "*I don't know when I accepted Christ. I've been a Christian from my childhood, from the very first.*" I, at 21 years old the new fiery evangelist in town, a college senior I had been elected National President of the American Association of Baptist Students, thought I knew everything. Some in my church, worried for her salvation, asked me to pay her a visit to invite her to our week-long revival services led by me, their new young pastor. I yet recall my nervousness, standing on the porch of her home (now on the National Registry) overlooking the White River, knocking at her door.

I was received with graciousness into the home of this uniquely gifted Christian woman and author. Now mind you, I didn't think of her like that back then! I was trying to gift her with an experience! *"You say you can't recall your Bon Voyage a moment? Let me help you find one!"*

Dr. Jacobs, who passed away the following year at the age of 75, was much further along the journey of walking with Christ than I, instead taught me



a lesson or two (though it took me several years to learn it). *"Are we to assume,"* she asked me, *"that the only way God saves is through a tearful revival experience, at the altar at the end of the aisle which one has courageously left their pew to walk?"* She was telling me that, in her opinion, the circumstances in which we embark on the journey are inconsequential. The crucial matter is that we one is on the Way, seeking to follow Christ. Dr. Margaret Moore Jacobs was, most assuredly, on the Way.

Growing up in church, I committed myself to be a follower of Christ at any number of junctures along the way through grade school, junior high, high school, and college. I imagine I saw half a dozen Billy Graham films in elementary school, making a profession of faith after each. When the statistics of people making professions of faith through his ministry are related I will be, by myself, five or six of those people! I'm hardly alone among those piling up multiple professions of faith, never trusting that the previous *Bon Voyage* moment of faith was authentic, was good enough, valid enough, sincere enough, powerful enough.

Each *Bon Voyage* moment proved, at last, not enough. In high school I recall at least two James Robinson crusades and one Angel Martinez crusade at Southside Baptist Church, walking the aisle and being ushered into a side room, praying *"the sinner's prayer."* In one of those crusades I was incredibly impacted, not so much by the preaching as by a contemporary Christian group of musicians singing, *"This is the very first day of the rest of your entire life. So forget the past, what's done is done, a brand new day has now begun. The very best is yet to come. Don't delay. Well start today. Throw away the memories of yesterday. You've been given a brand new beginning, so tell me why on earth don't you start living, today."*

That new start though, like all the others, wore off. Then, while a sophomore in college at Jonesboro, I had an experience in my faith journey jolting me harder than all the others. For

many years after, in those “*When you did become a Christian?*” conversations, I would have dated the *Bon Voyage* of my Christian experience to my sophomore year in college.

I’ve long since come to think differently. Though I’ve any number of potential *Bon Voyage* moments from which to choose, I would speak today like Dr. Margaret Moore Jacobs of Clarendon. “*You ask me about the ‘Bon Voyage’ moment of my faith? I don’t know. I’ve had many, many places along the way where my faith was renewed, invigorated, fortified, moments in which my faith took on new and exciting dimensions. But if you ask me when the ‘Bon Voyage’ moment occurred, when I commenced the journey, it’s so far in the misty past of my journey with Christ that I have no remembrance. I can’t remember when I wasn’t a Christian. But the important thing is not the way I embarked on the journey. That is inconsequential. The crucial matter is that, today, I am on the Way and trying, however imperfectly, to be a follower of Jesus. That the core of faith.*”

I’ve seen people torture themselves when their experience doesn’t measure up to being as dramatic as another’s, teenagers being particularly vulnerable. As a Methodist pastor, a Mainline denomination where children are brought up to be on the Way from baptism to confirmation and beyond, I’ve been called by parents of a young person after the evangelist has come to town at a friend’s church or a community gathering. The conversation goes something like this: “*Rev. Johnson, my child walked the aisle in a revival service last week. He/She has grown up in church and loved the church, but has never had an experience where they remembered so dramatically giving their life to Christ as their friend had done. He/She felt they needed to respond, that their Christian walk was somehow lacking by not responding to this altar call in a public affirmation of repentance and faith – and they want now to be baptized. But they were baptized as an infant. What do I do as a parent? How should I talk to them?*”

I relate to that. My parents, on multiple occasions, had to make that call to our pastor, Dr. John Lindsay. I hope you won’t torture yourselves by confusing a stirring religious experience with the “*Bon Voyage*” moment of faith. When Jesus called his disciples, it was a simple act of responding to his Call. It was enough. They would, each one, have many more stirring religious experiences over the course of their lives, but the *Bon Voyage* of their faith was in that simple act in the ordinariness of their daily life to follow Jesus.

Their commitment would not always hold. They stumbled. They failed. They dishonored their Lord. But, they were on the Way. And the faith is in the following.