

LEADING WITH PERSONAL CHALLENGES

BY ROB MERCHANT

On my desk sit a stone and a statuette. The stone comes from the waters of the Sea of Galilee, picked out from the water at Tabgha where there is a beautiful altar set by the shore a short walk from the Church of the Loaves and Fishes.

The statuette comes from Rome, a small replica of a statue found in the catacombs outside Rome, thought to be an early Christian representation of the Good Shepherd, a sheep laid across his shoulders. I keep these two objects before me, often holding the stone when I pray and giving thanks for

the one who has rescued me, to remind me of the journey of discipleship that we travel; a journey from the familiar into the unfamiliar.

Each time I hold the stone and see the statuette I am reminded again of the journey of disciples like Peter who travelled from the familiar waters and shores of Galilee to the sights and sounds of the unfamiliar in Rome. Jesus calls us, sends us, walks alongside us, and awaits us at our journey's end. Our shared journey of discipleship is the most wondrous adventure imaginable.

Yet so often in this journey into unfamiliar lands, I have found it is the familiar that most often causes me the moments of greatest doubt, uncertainty, and fear.

WALKING ON WATER

This summer I was reading again Matthew's account in chapter 14 of Jesus walking upon the water and I noticed for the first time how it was the familiar that caused Peter's fear to arise as he sank into the water.

The disciples in the boat have already cried out in fear, imagining the figure walking across the water towards them to be a ghost. Jesus has already told them to take courage and not be afraid in this utterly extraordinary, utterly unfamiliar moment in time. Caught up in this miraculous sight, Matthew tells us of Peter who stands ready to go to his Lord if he would call him. And in response to the invitation of Jesus to 'Come', Peter steps out of the boat onto the water.

Now, Peter had sailed the waters, fished the waters, he would have most likely swum in the waters, stood in the waters, but I doubt very much if he would have ever walked upon the waters; this was an unfamiliar moment. And it is fascinating that it is not this utterly unfamiliar moment that causes



Peter to sink. No. What causes Peter to sink was the familiar in the unfamiliar. Matthew tells us, 'But when he saw the wind, he was afraid...' (14.30a). Peter was a fisherman, the wind, even the unpredictable wind of the Sea of Galilee, would not have been unfamiliar to him. Yet it was the wind that caused fear to overwhelm him, to cause him to sink, and cry out 'Lord, save me!'

LIVING THROUGH THE PANDEMIC

I've never lived through a global pandemic before. These last eight months have been a strange unfamiliar time.

I serve as part of the leadership team of a theological college and we have had to change with a speed and daring that has been profoundly challenging.

As my wife's assistant minister, in late March I found myself holding printed out song words in front of an iPhone while my wife (and vicar) led sung worship.

These have been unfamiliar days, stepping out onto the water in faith, hoping beyond hope that the Saviour was calling.

At first I was doing well, urged on by the surge of adrenaline that comes in the response to a crisis and urgent change. I was embracing this strange new time. I was learning new skills. I was giving every ounce of my body, mind, and soul to the endeavour of responding to what had overtaken us in COVID-19. And then the familiar struck.

You see when I hit a crisis, a change in the tempo of life, when uncertainty pours in I turn to my self-medication of choice - work. For surely the more hours I worked, the more I poured myself into the task, the more I would be sustained in these unfamiliar days...?



I've been here before. Ten years ago in the midst of a PTSD episode in a parish setting I was working an 80+ hour week, pouring myself into ordained ministry, and medicating myself through the numbness of exhaustion. There are other self-medications available, most of them require consumption of one thing or another, normally to excess and normally to the detriment of those around you. A global pandemic may have been unfamiliar territory, but my response was all too familiar.

We each carry stories as we follow Jesus. Caught up in the great story of God, our stories are entwined and woven into the tapestry of the kingdom of heaven. My story contains developmental trauma in childhood, which resulted in complex PTSD, episodic depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. The effect of this past trauma in my life is deeply familiar to me. It has been explored in therapy, tended by prayer, calmed through medication. It shouldn't have come as a surprise to me that in the midst of the unfamiliarity of a global pandemic, that fear would come through the familiar expression of over-work, exhaustion, anxiety, and

depression. The phone-call to my GP was simple enough, but I was still deeply embarrassed that this oh-so-familiar part of my life would have caused me to once more sink into fear and despair.

LIVING IN A LIMINAL SEASON

I've been reading Susan Beaumont's excellent book, *How To Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going: Leading in a Liminal Season*. There is much to commend, but it is Beaumont's closing comments that have stayed with me.

'Leaders in liminal seasons must endure and interpret a lot of noise. There are those who long to go backward, to a more stable time reminiscent of former glory eras. Others want nothing more than to forge ahead and discover their new beginning. Few want to live in the disorientation of the middle stage, the liminal state where nothing feels resolved. And yet, the liminal season, ripe with possibility for learning and growth, is exactly where we need to be.' (p.157)

Living in a liminal season requires us

to be attentive to the familiar drive of anxiety, of self-medicating behaviours that seek to numb our fear, and surrender to Jesus who calls us out into this unfamiliar time all that is familiar.

THE BRAIN

Please forgive a priest's simplistic description of the brain, but the amygdala is the part of brain that drives our fight, flight, freeze responses. It receives information first and drives our response. Our frontal cortex is our developed brain, it processes that information, integrates it, and enables us to regulate our responses.

When we enter an unfamiliar time, our frontal cortex is focussed on responding to the need to navigate all that is new and different. It means our amygdala is free, no longer benefiting from the calming integrating affect of the frontal cortex, to drive our immediate unregulated response.

While Peter's frontal cortex was processing the wondrously unfamiliar of walking upon water, his skin felt the wind pick up, his amygdala recognised the threat of the wind, the way it could quickly unsettle the waters and that Peter wasn't in the familiar safety of a boat, and so Peter cried out because he was afraid.

HANDLING LIMINALITY

COVID-19 is a liminal season. As leaders we need to be more aware than ever of the need to live in this

season, to be attentive to the activity of the Spirit in this time, fixing our eyes upon our Saviour who has called us.

But this is a time when we are going to be triggered because our attention is on navigating the unfamiliar. Therefore we are going to fall-back on familiar habits and patterns, which can both give life and numb life. Some of us will fight to push forward. Some of us long to run back. Some of us will simply want to curl up and hide until it is all over. More than ever we need to be leaders who notice what is being stirred within us and have the courage to speak about our fears, in order to help us remain attentive to the waters we are walking on.

I'm no expert at walking on water. But I am learning that being honest about my mental well-being, not being ashamed and appropriately sharing my story, trusting others to help me recognise my self-medicating behaviours and surrendering those behaviours to Jesus, is a vital task to keep me above water in this liminal season.

A few years ago I stood beside what is considered to be Peter's tomb under St Peter's Basilica in Rome and was invited to lead our group in prayer. As I prayed I remembered lifting the stone out of the

waters at Tabgha, I remembered the passionate impulsive disciple who got out of the boat, and gave thanks for the wisdom of the same disciple who would walk in the unfamiliar territory of Rome, counsel the Church, lead Christ's people, and surrender his life in martyrdom to the one who had reached out and caught him up from the waters.

Be attentive to the familiar driven by fear in this unfamiliar season. Fix your eyes upon Jesus who has called you. And do not be ashamed, for Jesus has called you and your story with all the parts you'd rather forget, deny, minimise, and has brought you in the power of the Spirit into the great story of the Father's rescue and redemption of the whole all creation.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION



1. What do you turn to when under pressure to provide 'relief' that is harmful to you?
2. Who knows about this? Who could know about this?
3. If there was an alternative more helpful way of managing pressure, what would that look like for you?

Rob's new book, **Broken by Fear, Anchored in Hope**, is a searingly honest account of finding hope in the midst of the issues touched upon in this article.

