

Following the beheading of John the Baptist, Jesus attempted to go off by himself but somehow was followed by the crowds. After healing and feeding them, he dismisses the crowds and sends them on their way. He *makes* the disciples get into a boat and sends them to the other side of the sea.

Jesus wants to be alone to grieve John's death and to face the inevitable suffering that awaits him. Time alone to contemplate what lies ahead is in order. Solitude is a state of silence and receptivity that opens the soul to the spiritual depths and to divine guidance.

The person who does not know how to be alone does not know what conflicts lie in the depths of the heart and, secretly, may not want to know. Being alone in prayer serves to crack open and burst apart the shell of our superficial securities.

Alone, in prayer, we discover the depths of our own soul, the obscure powers lurking beneath ordinary consciousness, whose slaves we must inevitably remain so long as we are not aware of them.

The threats Jesus confronts in the depths of his soul are mirrored in the threats the disciples face at sea. A good story can be enjoyed on its face, but can also, on a deeper level, reveal profound spiritual, theological, and philosophical insights.

The boat is the church, the ark of the kingdom, an allusion to Noah's ark. It is a long way from shore and is 'tortured' (not battered) by the waves. The use of the word 'torture' is probably intentional; it points to human suffering that is unavoidable. The church that bears faithful witness to Jesus will be persecuted.

Water, storm, and night are symbols of everything in life that in any way can be an experience of insecurity, of the unfathomable, of the abyss. The abyss is a place of deep darkness, the playground of monsters, the realm of ghosts, the birthplace of fears—the fear of death, the fear of meaninglessness, the fear of one's own subconscious drives.

We will do almost anything to avoid awareness of the abyss, of being, in Kierkegaard's image, alone, suspended over 70,000 fathoms of water, many, many miles from any help. To wade in the shallows with the crowd, however, is to live in the illusions of our pseudo-securities.

Peter represents most of us. We want to be brave. We want to step out in faith. But, when we do we know the power of fear to sink our best intentions. When our fears are not governed by fear of God, we sink beneath the weight of our desires for security, for acceptance by the crowd, for success.

It is the word of the Lord that suspends us over 70,000 fathoms of water without a lifejacket. Elijah, fleeing for his life from Jezebel, who wants to kill him for killing her prophets of Baal, hides in a cave. The word of the Lord addresses Elijah, *What are you doing here?*

Elijah mumbles some “poor me” excuse for fleeing from the fray and is told to get back into it, to finish the mission of regime change. Elijah is now over 70,000 fathoms of water. He must choose to obey the word of the Lord or continue to hide in a cave.

Jesus commands Peter to get out of the boat. He obeys. He begins in faith until he pays more attention to the threats than to Jesus. Then he is swamped by his fears.

Annie Dillard has a beautiful image of the work of solitude. In the depths are the violence and the terror of which psychology has warned us. But if you ride these deeper down, if you drop with them farther over the world’s rim, you find what our sciences cannot locate or name, the substrate, the ocean or matrix or ether which buoys the rest: our complex and inexplicable caring for one another, and for our life together.

Facing our fears by entering ever more deeply into solitude, we discover the essentially communal nature of our life, one with God, one with others, one with all that is. It is only by facing our fears, by obeying the command to get out of the boat, to leave the cave, that we hear, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”