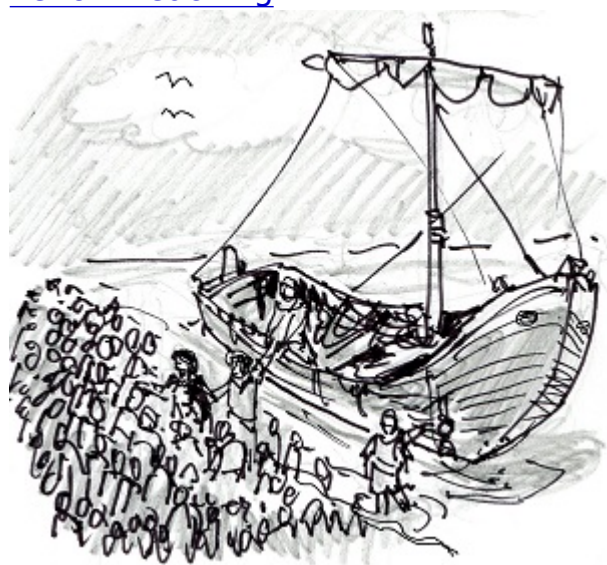


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by Pat Marrin

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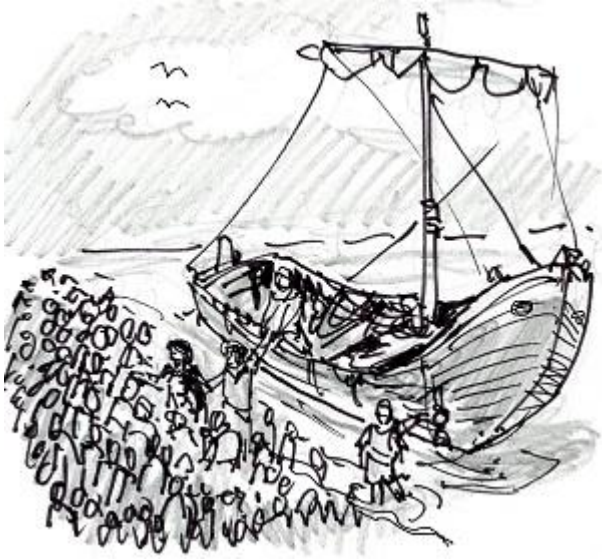
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“Jesus withdrew toward the sea with his disciples” (Mark 3:7).

1 Sam 18:9-9: 19:1-7; Mark 3:7-12

Today’s readings give us a feel for the dangers of popularity. After David slays Goliath, King Saul becomes so jealous of his rising popularity that he contemplates killing him as a potential rival. Jesus’ reputation is spreading so rapidly that he is in danger of being crushed by the crowds. Even more dangerous, his popularity is distorting his true mission because people perceive him as a powerful messiah instead of the servant leader he knows he has been called to be.

Our own political season cannot match the drama of the biblical narratives. Saul’s moods and paranoia deepen as David’s popularity surpasses his own. He obsesses over the victory chants of the women about David’s prowess in battle. He broods openly with his son Jonathan and even in the presence of his servants about killing David. The perceived rivalry will dog Saul’s remaining reign even as the priest Samuel is sent by God to secretly anoint David as successor to the throne. Only Shakespeare will match the Bible’s keen insights into human motivation as power corrupts leaders and foretells their downfall.

Jesus could not avoid the press of the crowds as his ministry of healing and exorcisms grew and the word went out about him. He preaches near the Sea of Galilee, with boats ready to rescue him if the crowd endangers him. Even when Jesus and the disciples crisscross the lake, throngs await him on both shores. He expels unclean spirits and orders them not to identify him, impossible under the circumstances. They are calling him the “Son of God.” His growing concern is that

people, even his own disciples, misunderstand his mission and are mistaking him for the warrior messiah projected by David.

This theme will continue in Mark's Gospel until the famous scene in Chapter 8 at Caesarea Philippi when Jesus quizzes his disciples about who the crowds think he is. It is here that Jesus begins to warn them about the reversal of popularity to come. His final march south to Jerusalem will be a descent into rejection, suffering and death. The only power he will wield is love, and his mission as redeemer will be accomplished with his death on the cross.

We only glimpse this paradox of real power in leaders willing to relinquish power for greater good, or after they are gone, sacrificed by assassination or expended in the struggle for causes greater than themselves. Smaller players in the game of popularity and victory are quickly forgotten or preserved as examples of pettiness and pride. Jesus remains both in memory and influence the model for servant leadership. By his death and resurrection, he shows us what real power looks like and can do.

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