



In the catacombs of Rome early Christians left messages of encouragement to one another by etching symbols onto the stone walls. Their faith was openly persecuted so it was necessary to communicate in code. One common symbol used in catacomb art was the ship or boat. One reason for the use of a ship under sail as a symbol of our faith is that in these nautical images a cross may be hidden in plain sight. The mast and sail disguise the cross of Christ.



In the deep cellars of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, an ancient etching is preserved, covered in glass. It is a simple outline of a ship, accompanied by the words: "Lord I have come." A 4<sup>th</sup> Century pilgrim marked their pilgrimage from far away to a very holy place with the etching in boat. This symbol of faith in Christ is a simple boat, powered only by oars.



In the 4<sup>th</sup> century when Christianity became the accepted faith of empire, more public depictions of boats became visible. This Roman sarcophagus includes a carving of a boat, rowed by the apostles and piloted by the Saviors, traveling confidently into life and hope and an open future...



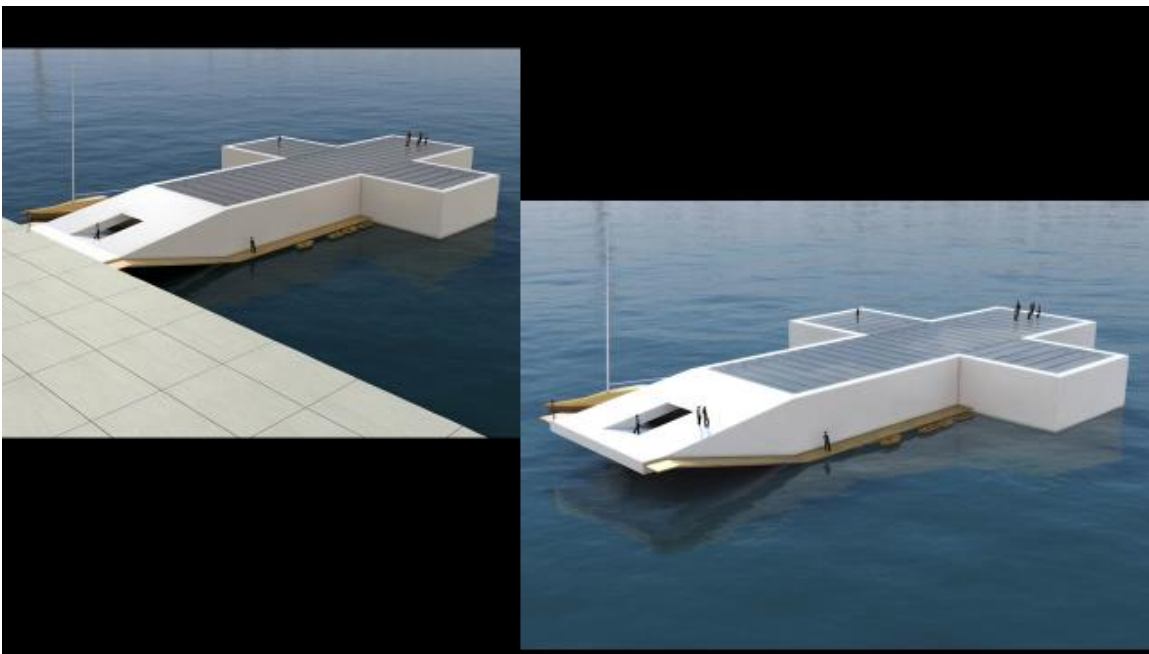
Writing in the second century the African theologian Clement of Alexander wrote "Let the dove or the fish or **the vessel flying before the wind**...be our sign" The Christian Church has long been depicted as a ship at sea or as a boat on the water. In stained glass and tapestry, in art and sculpture, over many generations the Church is depicted as a boat or as a ship at sea.

And if we used cathedral language in our congregation – the part of a sanctuary in which the congregation sits is called the nave. From the Latin *Navis* – which means ship...

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Rideau Park United Church    Rev. Steve Clifton



Some churches take on the form of a ship...  
This building houses a Presbyterian Church in Taiwan.



And this church is planned for the river port in Amsterdam. It is a literal ship that can be unmoored and will sail on the Amsterdam River.

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This sailing image is rooted in the Biblical narrative. God's people are like Noah's Ark; the church is place of refuge in a stormy world. In the ancient world view, water is associated with chaos, darkness and destruction. It is an untamed and uncontrollable element. God's faithful are together on a ship that sails above death and destruction. And we can think of Timothy Findlay's novel – *Not Wanted on the Voyage* – a novel that asks questions about who is allowed on the Ark, and who is excluded or left behind...



Boats are also frequently referenced in the Gospels. Jesus lived in Capernaum on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. His first followers were fishermen who made their living from boats, sailing on the waters of Galilee. Jesus preaches from a boat, sleeps in a boat, and sails away from demanding crowds in a boat. He steps out of a boat to walk on the waters; from a boat he calms the raging sea. So it's not hard to see why the Christian community chose a boat as their symbol. We are like the fishing boat on Galilee, carrying the Saviour and his followers to the far shore.

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So as we reflect on another year of life in our congregation, is Rideau Park like a boat too? We are, compared to many congregations, a big boat and so sometimes it might take a while for us to change direction. We are deliberate and consultative as we navigate our way together. We do not turn quickly.

We are, like bigger boats, built with compartments set apart from one another. Some may live in the music compartment, singing in choir or ringing bells... Others may work in the Outreach compartment, packing groceries for Christmas Cheer, raising awareness of community needs...

Some of us may move and work in a couple of compartments. Maybe though, there are compartments that we never enter. There may be areas of ministry that we rarely see. There are people hard at work that we have never met, or whose names we don't yet know.

Sometimes, if we do not see people working in another area of ministry we may come to believe that nothing is going on beyond our own compartments. But this not true.

There aren't many octogenarians in our childcare room on a Sunday morning but that doesn't mean we have no 80 yr. olds on the good ship Rideau Park.

Is the S.S. Rideau Park a cruise ship? A place of entertainment, and fun? Sometimes...

But ancient mariners on a boat were not passengers that were served; they were the crew. Raising sails. Tying knots. Pulling oars. If they didn't know how to do such tasks, they watched and learned from others. If they hoped to get anywhere, they had to share in the work and the decisions. And in a crisis it was *all hands on deck*.

And, in ancient days, the sea was terrifying. It was believed to be the one part of Creation that had not been tamed by God. In an age when everyone believed in sea monsters and an earth so flat that you could sail right off the edge, it took guts to set sail in a creaky wooden boat. Ancient sailors had to trust in God and in each other. And

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as we sail on into another year it takes courage for us. We need to trust in God and in each other as we sail together towards the far horizon.

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In the Christian story, beyond scripture there are stories of ships at sea.

In the 6<sup>th</sup> Century, an Irish holy person sat on the Western edge of the known world. His name was Brendan: St Brendan the Voyager. The story of Brendan's voyage was a best seller in the Middle ages. He and some companion monks sailed from Ireland, the Western edge of Europe – in a small leather hulled ship, out onto the unknown sea. He sailed to the Faroe islands, to Iceland, maybe even to North America's shores.

In contemplating his voyage he imagined the unknown sea that lay before him. Perhaps he felt anxious. Unsure. Needed courage or direction. Perhaps he felt excitement. Looking out at the sea before setting sail he prayed these words. We might pray them too...

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### ***A Prayer of St Brendan***

*Help me O God to journey beyond the familiar  
and into the unknown.*

*Give me the faith to leave old ways  
and to break fresh ground with You.*

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*Christ of the mysteries, I trust You  
to be stronger than each storm within me.  
I will trust in the darkness and know  
that my times, even now, are in Your hand.*

*Tune my spirit to the music of heaven,  
and somehow, make my obedience count for You.*

*Shall I abandon, O King of Mysteries, the soft comforts of home?  
Shall I turn my back on my native land, and turn my face towards the sea?  
Shall I say good bye to my beautiful land, placing myself under your yoke?  
Shall I pour out my heart to you, confessing my manifold sins, and begging forgiveness,  
tears streaming down my cheeks?  
Shall I leave the prints of my knees on the sandy beach, a record of my final prayer in my  
native land?  
Shall I then suffer every kind of wound that the sea can inflict?  
Shall I take my tiny boat across the wide sparkling ocean?  
O King of Glorious Heaven shall I go of my own choice upon the sea?  
O Christ will you help me out on the wild waves?*

May God bless us as we sail into another year together.

Amen and Amen