Warning: You are in a risky place.

But don’t go anywhere.

Let me explain.

This is a place where people have prayed for generations. Look around you: These walls are alive with their prayers. We are surrounded by prayers that ring for eternity.

This is a risky place because prayer is risky. Prayer can lead us to places we barely imagine.

In some churches, this room where you are sitting is called a “sanctuary,” but that is not what this room is really called.

The only sanctuary in an Episcopal church is a cabinet back there that holds the reserved sacrament called an Ambry.

No, you are not sitting in a sanctuary.

You are sitting in a boat, and boats are risky places to sit.

Where you are sitting is called the “nave,” a word that comes from the Latin navis, which means “ship.” Another word from the same Latin root is “navy.”

You are sitting in a ship – the nave.

Many churches were designed as upside down ships. In Northern California, we have several churches that were, in fact, built by shipbuilders.

We hear about ships and the apostle Paul in the lesson from Acts this morning. Paul sees a vision to risk his life by boarding a ship to bring the gospel of Jesus to people who long to hear it in Macedonia.
Saint Paul boards many ships in his life, and he endures storms, heavy seas and shipwrecks.

Indeed, there aren’t many sanctuaries in the stories of the Bible, but many ships. Mostly, the Bible is the story of people on long journeys, crossing deserts and crossing seas, physically and spiritually.

Abraham takes his family on a long journey to build a new nation; Jacob brings his family to Egypt, where his descendants are cast into slavery. Moses leads them out of Egypt, and they wander in the wilderness for 40 years.

Joshua brings them to the Promised Land where they settle, but not for long. They are cast into exile in Babylon, before they find a way to return.

In the fullness of time, Jesus is born, and the Magi – the Wise Men – follow a star a very long distance to find their newborn king.

As an adult, Jesus fasts in the wilderness for 40 days, then travels the length and breadth of the Holy Land gathering followers. Jesus rarely sits still. His followers, in turn, travel the world gathering more followers. They board many boats and ships.

It is no accident Jesus picks fishermen as his first disciples. They know what they are doing in boats.

One of these early followers of Jesus was a Jewish man with the common name “Yohanan,” which means “Graced by God.” We know him as John, the writer of Revelation, this mysterious New Testament book from which we hear today.

This particular John is not likely the writer of the Gospel of John, nor is he the “beloved disciple” also known as John. As I say, John is a common name.

This particular John knew there was no possible sanctuary on this earth from the storms and shipwrecks of life.

Bad things do happen to good people through no fault of their own.
The only sanctuary possible, the only temple where we can truly dwell in safety, is with our creator God, who loves us unconditionally for who we are now and who we are in the act of becoming.

John describes this reality in soaring and strange imagery using the metaphor of the Holy City of Jerusalem made new, descending from the clouds:

“Its gates will never be shut by day – and there will be no night there,” he writes. “And there will be no more night... for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.”

But come back to earth for a moment. There is something more than just travelogues to these stories in the Bible.

These are stories of people who are unfinished, still learning, still deepening their understanding and relationship with God.

They haven’t reached this new city yet. They are still in the boat.

Jesus knew these first followers could absorb only so much. There was more yet to learn. They were unfinished and they had many more seas to cross.

So, Jesus gives them a promise, and it is a big promise: “The Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.”

Jesus gives us the same promise.

We are unfinished. There is more to our journeys. There is more to learn and absorb.

The Holy Spirit is deep within each of us and is not finished with us. Listen, and you will know. The meaning of faith, I believe, is in the act of Holy listening, each in our own way.

The Holy Spirit comes to us in the quiet voice in the night, in the cry of a newborn infant, and in the smile of stranger.

Please let me bring you back to the story of the apostle Paul in the boat. There is a small detail that I love, and I want to point it out to you.
After Paul finishes preaching in Philippi, the leading city of Macedonia, he goes outside the city gates to pray by the river.

There Paul meets “a certain woman named Lydia.” I love this detail: she is a dealer of purple cloth. She is a real person – we know what she does and the color of the cloth she sells.

The Holy Spirit comes to Lydia. Her life is profoundly changed – and she invites everyone around her into her home to share in this experience of the Spirit.

We are invited into Lydia’s home. The Holy Spirit is not finished with us.

At the start I said that you are sitting in a risky place because prayer is risky. Our prayers might just nudge us into new ways of seeing the world, new ways of acting in the world, new ways of living.

Are we open to the Holy Spirit moving within us? Are we open to being unstuck from whatever holds us back from being the people Christ Jesus would have us be?

Soon we will fill these walls with more prayers, and our prayers will ring through eternity. AMEN.