

3rd Sunday after Pentecost (Year C)

Matthew 14:22-33

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking towards them on the lake. But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified, saying, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.'

Peter answered him, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.' He said, 'Come.' So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came towards Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!' Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?' When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'

Jesus was exhausted; it had been quite an eventful couple of days chronicled in the 14th chapter of Matthew's gospel. First, Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, was executed for speaking truth to power. King Herod's step-daughter, who had a grudge against John, danced seductively before the king and in his drunken stupor he promised her anything. She asked him for John the Baptist's head on a platter. And so he delivered.

News of this came to Jesus and he was troubled indeed. A) he's grieving the loss of his cousin. B) he understands that this bloody end signals a heightening of the tension between his ministry and the Roman Empire. In a way, Matthew's portrayal of John the Baptist's death is meant as a foreshadowing to Jesus' own death.

Yet in the midst of this uncertainty and lament, Jesus nevertheless finds himself in a position of doing ministry. Sometimes ministry doesn't wait until we're ready. Sometimes it just appears and we have to trust that God gives us what we need to do it despite our circumstances.

Jesus, you see, tried to withdraw and seclude himself. Maybe he needed to grieve. Maybe he needed to rethink his plans moving forward, lest he meet the same bloody end as his cousin John. But it was no matter; the crowds found him, surrounded him, and wouldn't let him have his introverted moment.

Today's story of Jesus walking on water appears in three of the four gospels: Matthew, Mark, and John. And in all three of these gospels, it comes right after what we often call the feeding of the five thousand. After feeding the 5,000 men plus their spouses and children with nothing more than five loaves of bread and two fish, Jesus finally gets his moment of solitude. He tells the disciples to go on ahead and get in the boats and begin crossing the Sea of Galilee. After dismissing the crowds, Jesus goes up on a mountain to pray by himself as the disciples begin their trek across the waters.

But things quickly turn dicey as the disciples run into a huge storm. The Sea of Galilee is a relatively small body of water, just 13 miles long and about 8 miles across at its widest, with an average depth of around 84 feet.¹ But the disciples, many of whom were fishermen, knew that the Sea's diminutive size didn't equate to safety. As the second-lowest lake in the world (surpassed only by the Dead Sea), the weather at the water level is rather warm and moist. However, the mountains on the east side of the Sea of Galilee are around 2,000 feet high creating weather that is cool and dry. When the cool, dry air of the mountains mixed with the warm, moist air of the sea, it could create rather violent weather patterns such as the one that battered the disciples in the boat in today's passage.

The wind was against them, the scripture tells us. Knowing that they were fishermen, we have to assume that this was not the first storm that they had ever weathered in a fishing boat. It's part of the job.

Now this brings me to something that I discovered this week that I want to share with you. Sometimes we listen to stories like these so many times throughout our lives; so many times, that we can sometimes stop looking at them carefully. Sometimes, after listening to a story like this and hearing countless sermons on it, we can gloss over the details. And I'm just as guilty of this as anyone else!

I was looking at the passage this week as I was preparing this sermon and I made a discovery that humbled me. I had always assumed that it was the storm that caused the disciples to fear first. However, if you look at the text, the first mention of the disciples being afraid is NOT in reference to the storm. Instead, the first time the verb "frightened" is used in today's story is not in reference to the storm but instead in reference to Jesus. That's right, it was not the storm that caused them the most fear; it was Jesus.

Now that changes the way we look at this story, doesn't it?

At first glance, it really shouldn't surprise us. After all, the storm was expected, or at the very least, explainable. Many of the disciples were fishermen. They're in a boat in the middle of the sea. Storms happen. Like I said, it's part of the job.

But seeing a human figure miraculously walk on the waters; well, *that's* not something you see every day.

And, in the Hebrew mindset, the sea was a scary place. In the literature of that day, the water represented chaos. It represented unraveling. It was a place that they literally believe spirits lived. So, at first glance, it makes sense that they would be scared of a ghostly figure walking toward them. The storm, they could explain. The floating man walking toward them was a different matter altogether.

Jesus senses their fear and tells them to have courage. "It's only me, y'all," he says to them.

And then Peter, dear Peter, gets a foolish idea. He decides to step out of the boat. He decides, as the art is titled on the front of your bulletin, to "step into the swell." But then he gets frightened. Or distracted. Or both.

¹https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sea_of_Galilee

Either way, Peter immediately begins to regret his decision. His life becomes unraveled. He begins to sink into the depths in his panic and he cries out for Jesus to save him. And immediately, we are told, Jesus reaches out to save his friend. In the middle of the swell, Jesus says to Peter, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” And once they get back in the boat, the storm comes to an end, and so does this story.

Now, I want to say a very strong word in Peter’s defense. Peter gets a bad wrap in this story. Peter, in almost every story he’s in in the Biblical narrative, is - for better or for worse - the first person to volunteer or step up to the plate. Now, sometimes it gets him into trouble. His heart is always in the right place but, bless his heart, his enthusiasm sometimes puts him in tough positions.

Once he saves Peter from himself, Jesus asks him genuinely, “Peter, why did you doubt? Why did you get distracted? What was it that you feared so much when I was right in front of you?”

Now, here I have to say, I’m really disappointed in Jesus. You know why? Because I think Jesus is asking the wrong question. Instead of asking Peter why *he* didn’t have enough faith, *I* think he should have asked the same question to a different person; well, to *eleven* different persons, if you catch my drift.

You see, in the Stephen Fearing Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Jesus instead turns to the other eleven disciples - you remember them? The ones that are back in the boat? - and asks *them* why *they* had so little faith! After all, they were too scared to even take the first step. Peter, on the other hand, did what they could not. He stepped out of the boat. *He* left the safety of the vessel. *He* left his canoe behind rather than drag it into the mountains, to use Tod Bolsinger’s metaphor, for those of you who have had the chance to read “Canoeing the Mountains.”

Peter, though he stumbled, exhibited two things: courage and vulnerability. And, as we’ll learn together in a few weeks as we gather to watch Brené Brown’s Netflix special, *that* makes all the difference! I’m convinced that Jesus Christ can do more with *one* disciple who decides to take a risk for the sake of the Gospel than with *eleven* others who always choose the safe option.

So if we are to have the courage and vulnerability of Peter to step out of the boat and follow Jesus into the storm of our lives, into the storms of the world around us, then what can we learn of Peter’s brief aquatic experiment?

We need to stay focused on Jesus when the storms come ablowin’. And that’s not always an easy thing to do. A friend of mine here in Lexington is preaching on the gospel lectionary passage for today which comes from the Gospel of Luke. In that text it says the following, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” I’ve never spent a minute of my life literally plowing so I never really understood what this passage meant until he explained to me that in order to plow in a straight line, a farmer has to have two points of reference ahead of them, one near and one far, and keep them aligned, in order to plow in straight lines. In a farmer looks behind and forgets to look forward, the field will be a disaster.

Peter, I think, looked back. Or down. Or sideways. He looked away from his point of reference. And we must learn from his brave encounter. We must learn to stay focused on Jesus, our Holy Reference Point, in order to plow in a straight line and *keep focused*.

And, in order to keep focused on Jesus, we need to be honest about what it is that distracts us. So, my invitation to y'all this week is simple. Take a moment in the next few days to take a pause and think about the things that are distracting you from whatever God is calling you to do right now.

For you and I, my friends, are at the plow. We are plowing the fields for God's kingdom. And as we do this work, the storms will come. Storms will come in our families. Storms will come in our community. Storms will come at the border. Storms will come from the doctor's office. Storms will come in all varieties. But when those storms come, today's passages reminds us that Jesus is *right* there with us as the winds turn against us. And Peter reminds us that the journey to faithfulness starts with a single step.

In the name of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of God's children say Amen.