

Matthew 14: 22-33 "Where's Your Focus?" Rev. Janet Chapman 8/13/23

Alyce McKenzie tells a story about a friend, Gary, who is a computer whiz in his mid 40's, been married and divorced 3 times, and was dating a woman, Anne, also divorced with a 7 year-old-daughter. He and Anne came asking if Alyce would do their wedding ceremony. The counseling and wedding planning was going along fine until, about a month in, Gary began to get very nervous about getting married again. When he told Anne, she suggested he get away for a day to clear his head. So he started driving with no particular destination in mind, and ended up at a local lake. He got out of his car and began to walk, to soothe his nerves. He came to a bench that looked out over the lake and sat down. He started to intentionally breathe more deeply in an attempt to unravel the knots in his stomach. As we watched the water, it was like looking into a mirror of the soul and things began to grow clearer. He saw that there were three knots in his stomach and each had a name. One was his fear that the odds were against him, that would just keep repeating the same relationship patterns. The second was his fear of stressors coming at the fragile new family from the outside, things like custody stress, job stress, and extended family pressures. The third was the hardest, the most difficult knot of them all: it was the fear that he was just not worthy of another human being's love, not worthy of God's love. I wonder if any of these fears have tormented your life? We need to name our own knots, to focus our own fears in order to overcome them. Gary had the right idea in taking time to find a quiet place to sit and name the knots in his stomach.

Just over twenty centuries earlier, another man looked out over another lake to which he had retreated to pray. Jesus, always the Master Teacher, models for us an essential part of coping with fear and stress. Jesus takes time to be still, to reflect and meditate, to pray. Our

gospel author Matthew only mentions Jesus praying during 2 critical moments, here on this stormy night and in the Garden of Gethsemane just before his death. Coincidence? I don't think so. It is at these moments that Jesus draws strength from God, sheltering in the divine intimacy of God's love. But what is so critical on this dark and windy night? Jesus' ship of faith has just been battered by the rejection of his hometown folks and the barbaric beheading of his cousin, John the Baptist, by King Herod. Thus, he knows his time is limited, he and his followers are in danger. The crowds of people are constantly pressing in on him as his popularity grows. Most recently, 5000 showed up hungry and tired just to hear him teach, so he had to make sure there were enough loaves and fishes for everybody to go home well-fed, you might call it the first church potluck. And like any good potluck, the disciples have to go around and collect the leftovers. After it's over, Jesus knows he's needs some time to himself because such a popular movement will not go unnoticed in Tiberias, the seat of Herod's power. Thus, this story so far is about danger... about what to do when your back is up against the wall, of how to respond when the whole world is against you, of how to cope when you have next to nothing to counter the forces of injustice and evil. Jesus finds time to pray, to lift up each of his fears to God and exchange them for courage, by allowing God's comfort, healing and power to fill his heart, mind, and soul. But prayer time never lasts long enough, we always seem to get distracted by something. I know that I've been guilty of leaving my cell phone in another room to get some quiet while I pray, only to forget to turn the ringer off, and once it rings, my focus is gone.

Preacher Alyce notes that within today's story, it is like the disciples are in the next room but the ringer is still on and Jesus' prayer time is over. They are in distress. As Jesus squints at the horizon, he sees the disciples' little boat bobbing all over the place. They are by themselves

in the middle of the sea, being tossed around by the waves by a violent wind. This is a condition I have often felt in myself. I sense a storm coming, I feel that something's wrong. The world seems alien, frightening, adversarial as obstacles set themselves up all around me working against my plans. I wonder if you have ever felt that way before. Our story says three significant things are going on: The disciples are being battered by the waves, they are far from shore, and the wind is working against them. If it were just one out of three, the disciples might be able to get free, but all three means they are in a situation where they can't get out of it by themselves. We feel sorry for such folks, we feel compassion for their situation. Feel compassion for that woman who says, "Pastor, things are going really bad with my husband. I want us to come and talk with you or someone but he only says our problems are too deep for that." His response tells me he is right. Have compassion for the person who says, "I can't overcome this addiction by myself." She's right. Feel the pain of someone who says, "I can't lose this weight and get my health and self-respect back by myself." He's right. "I can't leave this relationship by myself... I can't move beyond my grief by myself... I can't, you fill in the blank, by myself." These people are all right. We can't on our own strength alone.

Then the story, then our story, shifts. Early in the morning, someone comes walking toward our battered boat, as it is being blown farther and farther away from shore. Here comes someone walking toward us who could have chosen to be anywhere else right now. Here comes someone who could be standing safely on shore watching them, us, suffer thinking, "What a shame." Here comes someone who could be having a daily spa treatment and personal masseuse, who could be dining at a four-star restaurant, rather than kneeling in the dust and multiplying grimy loaves and gritty fish. Why? Because he chooses to do so, having

spent that much needed time in prayer and contemplation. Paul tells us in Philippians, “Jesus didn’t count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but humbled himself taking the form of a servant, and being found in human form, he was obedient, even unto death on a cross.” Here comes someone walking toward us, but that’s only half the sentence. It finishes with, “On the water.” Now we would be missing the point of the story if we wrestled with how this was physically possible? Too many people miss the point in reading scriptures, a mild plug for my upcoming book study. People miss the point when they try to dismiss an incident as a fabrication or illusion on the part of the disciples or chalk it up to hidden rocks which Jesus stepped on to make his way out to them. Matthew isn’t focused on such things. The gospel author wants us to ask instead, “Who walks out into the water when it is stormy, when it is dangerous, when it seems impossible to navigate?” The disciples believe the figure to be a ghost because who else would attempt such a feat? Psalm 77 answers the question as it recalls the Israelites crossing the Red Sea saying, “When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they were afraid, the very deep trembled.” Who walks into stormy, frightening waters? God does, often in people like you and I. To us, God says, “Take heart, have courage!” using the same word used in the Gospel of John, “Take heart, I have conquered the world.” I can’t help but see God trudging through raging waters as first responders seek to rescue flood victims. I can’t help but see God in fire personnel barreling through towering fire swirls to pull people to safety. And I can’t help but see God in addicts now navigating uncharted waters to guide other addicts to recovery and hope for a better life. God does this in you and I.

Initially, maybe Peter recognized this as he jumped out of the boat to head toward Jesus. Or maybe he just wanted to be closer to Jesus, to be in the proximity of one who does such

things with obedience, trust, and full-on compassion. We are all encouraged to be like Peter and get out of the safety of our boats, out of the comfort of our own traditions and places, and go into the waves, reaching for the hand of Christ. Herein is the true miracle of this story – Peter rises above the outer conditions confronting him and starts to walk over the troubled waters as well – he is able to take a few steps. In those moments, he must have had a calm and trusting mind focused solely on God – that is the miracle in this story. The point is not the walking on water, the point is the focus. In Matthew’s gospel, the act of doubting is all about losing one’s focus and not like we typically understand the word “doubt.” How do we know? Because of what happens next. The text says Peter feels the wind, he starts to pay attention to the wind, not to Jesus, and he begins to sink. He has lost his focus, his Spirit-led moment is cut short too soon. Jesus words to “Take heart” or better yet, “Stay focused” are lost in the wind and the sinking takes over. So don’t miss the point of this story – we are not being called to walk on the water, we are being called to focus on God. In the midst of the storm, dear friends, stay focused, for the one who has conquered the world is walking toward you now.