

Matthew 14: 22-33

This morning we got out of the boat to meet Jesus! In case you didn't know, the part of the church where the congregation sits is known as the nave, another name for boat. Typically, churches are shaped to resemble an upside down boat. Take a look the next time you are in the sanctuary. The reason for this is to remind us of some of the Bible stories... those such as Noah and how God kept him safe on the ark; that many of the disciples were fishermen before they began following Jesus. We are reminded of the way Jesus slept peacefully in the boat while a storm raged, and the disciples were terrified; and we could even relate it to today's gospel reading of Jesus walking on water and Peter getting out of the boat to join him. So here we are... out of the boat! Does it feel awkward? Most likely. Even though we spent a lot of time in our cars in the parking lot during Covid, we aren't quite accustomed to sitting in folding chairs in the parking lot, and perhaps Jesus doesn't expect us to always be comfortable when we are reaching out to him.

But first, let's talk about how the disciples got into the boat without Jesus. If you remember back to last week's lesson, Jesus was trying to get away to a quiet place to mourn because of John the Baptist's death. Instead, out of compassion, he ministered to, and had his disciples feed, at least 10,000 people. This morning we hear that after the leftover bread was collected Jesus told his disciples to get into the boat and head to the other side of the lake, that he would catch up with them. He was going to take some time for himself. Jesus recognized his need to reconnect with his Father and to himself be spiritually fed. If Jesus has this need, then certainly we, too, have the need to reconnect with God. So, here we are, out of the boat, making that connection. And this connection needs to be made, not just on Sunday mornings, but daily as we set aside a time to pray and be in the presence of God.

After his personal retreat time is over, Jesus is ready to rejoin his disciples, who are in the boat. If I'm remembering the commentary correctly, they are about ½ mile off shore, and there is a strong wind blowing. The disciples are used to being in boats in bad weather so the wind isn't a problem for them, except that it was so windy they would have to row instead of using sail power. It is most likely that they were wondering how Jesus was going to get to wherever their destination was... maybe they thought he had arranged for someone to ferry him across the lake to meet them. I'm sure they never expected him to start walking to them. Given the fact that they were rowing the boat, they would be facing away from their destination, looking towards the shore they left, the shore which Jesus was now walking away from, towards them. And when they catch sight of him, (we don't know who it was that first spotted him, we're only told "the disciples saw him walking on the sea"), they were terrified. They thought he was a ghost! That's a new rendition of the Holy Spirit, isn't it? Seriously, though, Jesus knew their fear and calmed them by saying, "Do not be afraid, it is me." We don't know how the rest of the disciples took this, but we know Peter, impetuous, outspoken, Peter, told Jesus to prove it... "If it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Not something you or I would demand... but we have gotten out of the boat and isn't it beautiful sitting out here in nature, in the open, not surrounded by walls?

Jesus responded to Peter with one word, "Come." Peter left his fear in the boat and climbed out, onto the water, walking towards Jesus. Until he realized where he was. Until he took his eyes off Jesus and allowed his fear and doubt to consume him, and he sank. Well, Jesus had named him Peter, the Rock, and rocks do naturally sink. But Jesus wasn't going to let this living rock be consumed by doubt, fear, or water. Peter called out to Jesus, and Jesus reached down, taking Peter by the hand, pulled him out of the water. Together they climbed back into the boat.

We can say this story is about Peter, about his fears, about his doubt, about his little faith, and it can be, but we need to again be reminded of the mustard seed, and how a tiny bit of faith is all we need to do great things. We can look at Peter and see that he both doubted and trusted Jesus. He was walking

on water! The only way we can walk on water is when the bay or the lake is frozen over. Peter was walking on water, what boaters call choppy water, called that because the wind stirs up the waves. If you've ever been out on the lake in a storm, or even stood on the shore watching the lake during a storm, you know how those waves can form. Lake Erie is notorious for quick storms that come up almost out of nowhere. I remember one time out fishing on the lake with my dad when one of those storms came up. My dad headed back to the shore, but I'll never forget sitting down in the little white boat looking up at a wall of water. I understand the fear Peter felt, and the doubt that he was safe. How often do we think that, even though Jesus is right there within reaching distance, we're out there on our own and we doubt that what we need is within our grasp? And yes, we have to look at what we need. So often we want things that we don't get. Perhaps when we don't get them, we later look back at that situation and realize we didn't get them because they weren't for our best interest. But when we reach out to Jesus to save us, he's right there reaching for us.

And that is another way this story can be interpreted... Jesus was coming to meet the disciples; he wasn't expecting them to go into unfamiliar territory all by themselves. Just as Jesus always goes before us to lay out a path when he sends us on a mission, and then accompanies us on that mission, Jesus' plan was to be with his disciples. Even if it meant he had to walk across the lake to get to them. Even if it meant he had to allow them to be terrified, to be afraid and have doubts, Jesus knew he was coming to them. Jesus knew he wasn't going to allow them to move onto the land on the other side of the lake all alone.

I recently read an anecdote written by Mike Bayard. He writes: "As a Boy Scout, I attended summer camp every year. And, as usual, the first day brought the required "swimming test." This requirement was necessary as it divided us into the appropriate sections of the pool. For the last 3 years I had tested into the shallow end, because I was too afraid of the test, which required jumping into the deep end of the pool.

This year, however, I was resolved to pass the test. The hour of the test arrived and the lifeguard, who knew of my fear, agreed to jump into the pool with me. We agreed that on the count of three we would both jump into the pool together and together swim the entire length of the pool. We began . . . ONE . . . TWO . . . THREE . . . SPLASH . . . the lifeguard was in the pool and I was still standing on the side of the pool. He got out and encouraged me to jump in with him. ONE . . . TWO . . . THREE . . . SPLASH . . . there I was again on the side of the pool and he again was in the pool. Again, he got out and encouraged me and reiterated that he would be there along side me as I jumped into the pool, and swam to the other end. We began again . . . ONE . . . TWO . . . THREE . . . SPLASH . . . SPLASH . . . we were both in and swimming toward the other end. Half away across I realized what I was doing and became scared, but the lifeguard continued to reassure me as we swam across the last length of the pool.

Like the lifeguard, Jesus goes before us encouraging us and companionship us even in the most difficult moments in life."

Jesus is there, even when we climb out of the boat, even when we jump into water over our heads, Jesus is there to reach out and walk with us. All we need to do is take his hand.
All glory be to God.