

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

August 9, 2020, The 10th Sunday of Pentecost/The 19th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Psalm 105:1-6, 45b; Matthew 14:22-33

IMMEDIATELY! INTO THE MIDST OF THE STORM!

INTRO TO Matthew 14:22-33

This morning's New Testament lesson is from Matthew 14:22-33. Before we listen to this morning's reading, we need to hear the beginning of the story because it tells us so much about the heart and love of Jesus.

As we learned last week, at the beginning of Matthew 14 we read the story of Jesus getting the news that his cousin, John the Baptist has been murdered by Herod. Hearing the horrific story of John being beheaded and his head presented to Herod on a platter, Jesus needed time away from the crowds to grieve and be alone with God. So, Jesus left the crowds and the disciples behind, going by boat to a deserted place to be by himself.

But the crowds saw where he was going and they walked around the north end of the Sea of Galilee and got there before him. When Jesus went ashore, wanting only to be alone with his grief, he saw a great crowd. And while most of us would have probably rowed back out into the Sea, Jesus got out of the boat, and Matthew says he had compassion for the crowds and he stayed with them and cured their illnesses. But as evening came, there was now this large crowd in a deserted place along the Sea, who were hungry.

With the help of five loaves of bread and two fish Jesus fed that crowd of at least 20,000 people including men, women and children.

Then once again Jesus wanted and needed to be alone, to pray and be with God as he continued to grieve the heartbreaking loss of John, and continued to seek rest and strength for his ministry. So, Jesus once again sent everyone away and that is where we join the story in Matthew 14:22.

Matthew 14:22-33

This is the story we need right now, isn't it? The story of Jesus's power over the stormy winds and waves. We've learned a lot about storms in the last six months of living in a world that is not like anything we could have ever imagined!

In the last few weeks, I've been in the midst of many conversations when someone says: "A year ago I wouldn't have been able to imagine a conversation like this one."

And whether we've been talking about healthcare, Covid19, children going back to school, politics, racism, unemployment, how people treat each other, protests in the streets, depression, loneliness, missing hugs, or missing family and friends,

it's true that we are having conversations unlike any we've ever had before.

So, it's hard to imagine a better time for this story from Matthew's gospel than right now!

It is clear from Matthew's telling of the story that the disciples were in danger for their lives. Matthew makes sure that we can feel their fear.

Their boat was far from land,

it was now early morning, sometime between 3 and 6 a.m.,

so, they had been battling the sea throughout the night.

The wind was against them so they were sailing and rowing into fierce winds.

When Matthew describes the waves, he says they were “torturing the boat.”
The waves weren’t just battering the boat, they were torturing the boat.

And into the midst of the storm, into the midst of their fears and the winds and the torturing waves, Jesus came walking to his disciples across the water. One author I read this week says that “Jesus’ miracle of walking on the sea is not just to “show off” who he is, but to come to the aid of his threatened disciples.”

They were in danger, so Jesus came from his time of prayer and his own grief, to bring rescue and safety to his disciples whom he loved.

See: Interpretation Bible Commentaries: Hare, Douglas R.A., *Matthew*,
Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993, p. 169.5

Jesus came across the water to them. And for those living in that first-century Mediterranean world there was a deeper symbolism in Jesus walking on the water, that went beyond the miracle of him walking on the water. In those days there was a belief in spirits, including wind spirits. It was believed that these spirits were mischievous and evil and liked to interfere with and trouble the lives of humans. The people’s response to this was to find a more powerful spirit to counter the lesser spirits.

Pilch, John J., *the Cultural World of Jesus, Cycle A*, Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1995,
pp. 121-123.

In both this pervasive belief about spirits, and in the thinking of the Old Testament followers of God, and these first century Jewish men in this boat, there was the firm conviction that only God could walk on water. As Fred Craddock, the wonderful preacher and teacher has said: “The scriptures showed it over and over again, in Job, in Isaiah, in Habakkuk, in the Psalms, it is God who walks on the storm, God who makes a path in the sea. Why? To show a miracle? To say, ‘Hey, look, I’m walking on water?’ No...In Ancient times the sea was the place of evil. The evil monster was there; the Leviathan was there. The enemy of all that we know as good and right is there in the water. In the Bible, the water is the abode of all the forces that are against us. And God walks on the sea. In other words, there is no power, no storm, no wind, and no force in the world that God cannot conquer, no evil over which God is not superior, nothing that can destroy your life because God loves and cares for (us).”

Craddock, Fred, *The Cherry Log Sermons*, Louisville:
Westminster John Knox Press, 2001, pp. 31-35.

So, for those disciples in the boat, and those who were told the story later, and those who even later read the story in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus walking on the water told them about God’s power in Jesus’ life. This wasn’t a miracle Jesus did, this was the power of God in Jesus’ life. (see Craddock)

Jesus was able to walk on top of the chaos,
and through the buffeting winds

and over the torturing waves because God gave him the power to do it. God was with Jesus.

This morning’s story is a lifeline for us, to remind us that the One who has the power over the storms, is Jesus who comes walking to us through the storms.

It was into the midst of the storms and fears and the battering, torturing waves that Jesus walked across the sea to rescue his disciples.

The disciples saw Jesus and thought he was a ghost walking toward them through the sea, and they cried out in fear.

And immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

I am so thankful for the “immediatels” in this story. Immediately Jesus said “do not be afraid.”
 “Take heart,
 I am here,
 I am with you
 Do not be afraid.”

And when Peter walked out of the boat onto the water to meet Jesus, and began to sink into his fears and the waves, immediately Jesus reached out and grabbed him and pulled him up out of the water and into the boat.

Peter was justified in his fear. He was in the midst of a storm that was threatening his life, and he was shrinking. Jesus pulled him up out of the water and he didn’t berate him, or say “man-up, it’s just a little storm.”

I imagine it was with great love in his voice that Jesus said to Peter:

“Oh you of little faith, why did you doubt?” Don’t you know that I will always come to you? I love you in your little faith, don’t be afraid,
 Because I am always here,
 I am always reaching out for you,
 I am always coming to you across the stormy seas.

There is no need to doubt because I will always immediately reach out for you when you call,

and bring you to safety.

(David Lose, In the Meantime, davidlose.com, for 8-13-17)

We who know about storms and fears today, aren’t called by Jesus to downplay the difficult storms and fears in our life. Jesus doesn’t downplay the storms in our lives.

This right now is a stormy season in our lives, in our nation’s life, in the life of the world.

The fear we feel is real! The storminess is real. The uncertainty and the unknown are real.

But stronger than the fear, the uncertainty, the unknown, and the storms,
 is the strong love of Jesus for you and for me, and our world.

And that love will not let us go.

As Fred Craddock once preached: “In other words, there is no power, no storm, no wind, and no force in the world that God cannot conquer, no evil over which God is not superior, nothing that can destroy your life because God loves and cares for (us).”

This morning we are called to remember that we are loved by our Savior Jesus who comes into the midst of storms,

powerfully walking to us as we cry out in fear.

And immediately Jesus holds onto us saying:

“Take heart, I am with you, do not be afraid.

Even if your faith is little,

Even if you can see more of the storm than you can see me,

Even when you are sinking and the storm is overwhelming you,

Take heart,

I am here,

I am with you,

I am holding onto you

I am holding you up,
Do not be afraid,
I am stronger than the storms.