

“Storms”
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Matthew 14:22-33

Jesus sent the disciples ahead of him. He needed some alone time to pray, after fighting the Pharisees, teaching the crowds, and miraculously feeding them. So they boarded a boat and set off on the Sea of Galilee. It was probably a typical fishing vessel, and thanks to the diligent digging of archaeologists, we know that they were small. On average, maybe 27 feet long, 8 feet wide, and about 5 feet from the keel to the gunnels. Not a lot of room for twelve grown men. These fishing boats were designed to operate within sight of the shore, but at night, to prevent running aground, it would have been wise to go farther out, but that was not a good place for a small boat to be in a storm.

With the wind and the waves lashing their tiny craft, the disciples fought all night to stay afloat in the darkness, the storm clouds obscuring the stars that might have guided them to shore. With no idea where they were, they desperately waited for the light of dawn when they could get their bearings. They must have been exhausted physically and emotionally. So no wonder they mistook Jesus for a ghost as he walked on the water toward them. They weren’t thinking straight. Even if they were, despite the miracles they’d already seen, somebody walking on water – well, that’s just not possible, because gravity works.

Jesus called out to them, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid,” and by hearing his voice, the disciples could begin to see Jesus for who he really was. However, Peter, not trusting his own ears or eyes, not entirely convinced that what he was seeing was real, responded to Jesus with a demand for proof. “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” Now we might be tempted to criticize Peter for his lack of faith, for his audacity in testing Jesus, but it

was actually a gutsy move. Peter was ready to get out of that boat in the middle of a storm based on the command of someone whose identity he still doubted.

Jesus simply said to him, “Come,” and Peter did, walking on the choppy waters that had spent all night trying to kill him. What an unbelievable experience, and, in fact, Peter found it so unbelievable that after a few steps he started to sink. Terrified, he called on Jesus, “Lord, save me!” And Jesus pulled him out of the water. They both got into the boat, and once Jesus was onboard, the storm stopped, and the disciples worshipped him, “saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God.’”

Some of us here may have literally experienced what it’s like to be on a boat far from shore during a storm. Maybe that boat was smallish and you cried out to Jesus, “Save me!” But all of us, from time to time, experience storms in life that scare us. We feel powerless, frustrated, confused, and inadequate as we struggle against forces dragging us down into the darkness where we can’t breathe.

Your storm could be an illness or an injury that takes away something you treasure, the ability to do certain things you once enjoyed, and there may be no end in sight, or perhaps there is an end in sight, but your diagnosis is terminal and the end is death. Or maybe you’re healthy, but someone you love is sick, and caring for them takes time and energy that you give willingly, but it alters the contour of your life and feels overwhelming sometimes.

Your storm could be a troubled relationship with your spouse, a child, a sibling, a parent, a friend, or a co-worker; a situation where having civil conversation is so hard that the hope for forgiveness and reconciliation is totally out of sight. Your storm could be your job or the school you attend, a place where you feel unstable and insecure, where a sense of futility drains

meaning out of what you do. Or perhaps you don't have a job and need one and can't find one no matter how hard you try, and you stay up late at night wondering how the bills will get paid.

Your storm could be a sense that you don't belong, that you don't fit in anywhere, that no one will accept you for who you are, and their rejection and judgement makes you feel ashamed and worthless and isolated. Or maybe you're living a double life, conforming to the expectations of others, sacrificing your integrity for their acceptance, and it makes you miserable, because you feel like a fake.

Your storm could be a crisis of faith, where you're not really sure what you believe anymore, perhaps because God seems absent in the midst of your pain, absent in the midst of the lies and cruelty of our world. Does God love me? What I am supposed to do with my life? How do I know if it's the voice of Jesus? Why so much suffering, if our God is both powerful and good? And you feel so guilty about your doubts, because everybody else seems to have it all figured out.

And of course, all of us right now are riding the choppy waves of a pandemic and all the anxiety and uncertainty it provokes, all the sickness and death and grief, all the changes and what's been taken from us, simple things like shaking hands safely. We're shaken by fresh events that show how the evil of racism still strikes at the heart of our society. We're seasick from our toxic political environment and how that poisons the public sphere to the point where we don't talk openly and honestly about things that need to be talked about, because we're afraid of judgment and condemnation from those who disagree with us. And there's no end in sight to any of those three things. About the only thing we can count on is that the storm is going to get worse before it gets better.

There are more life storms than anyone could possibly name, and beyond that endless list, you might feel yourself shaking, breaking, sinking into the abyss without even knowing why you feel that way. But for each and every storm, no matter how hopeless it may seem, Jesus is walking on the water to bring us peace.

To receive that blessed peace starts with listening for the voice of Jesus. That's where it started for the disciples on the sea. They heard the voice of Jesus encouraging them to "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." And that same voice calls with the exact same message all day every day, and there are many ways to listen for it and hear it. Prayer, worship, and reading the Bible are three very reliable ways to hear Jesus calling, but he will not limit himself to those practices. He will reach out to us relentlessly, using every resource at his disposal, including dreams and events that we often write off as coincidences, to penetrate the fury of our storm, and if we can clear the clutter of life for even a few moments, we might hear his voice calling, "Hey, it's me. Don't be afraid. Take heart and be courageous."

Sometimes, though, we listen intently and still hear nothing, or we hear something, but we're not quite sure if it is Jesus. But when we hear the voice of Jesus, deep down inside there's a vibration, like the twang of a guitar string that's been pulled really hard, and we need to take a chance and trust that twang. Yeah, it's risky. We're afraid of getting it wrong, but a sinking boat in a storm isn't any better. We'll find out soon enough if the voice belongs to Jesus, because if it is his voice, then we will see him for who really he is.

But to make sure it's Jesus we're seeing, we need to get closer. And to get closer, we have to step out of the boat and into the storm, just like Peter did. When Jesus calls us we need to respond, even when every fiber of our being is telling us it's crazy. We like our boats, even when they're sinking, but the life of faith often requires that we walk away from the solid

structures we've built and enter a more fluid reality where we don't know what will happen next. If we can manage that, then we will walk with Jesus on the water, close enough to know in our hearts that it is him. But inevitably, we will sink.

For Peter, it was the wind. Here he is walking on the water, but that strong wind distracted him. He got scared and lost focus on Jesus, and pretty soon, down he went. We've got plenty of distractions – an overwhelming glut of information, too many decisions to make, obligations, unrealistic standards we set for ourselves – and we're scared of missing out or making mistakes or failing and, sometimes, we can be scared of succeeding, too, because success comes with a price. And if you think you can escape all those things and always stay focused and never sink, you are either a saint or delusional. We're all going to sink, because we're all sinners. The question is, what do we do when it happens?

Cry out, "Lord, save me!" Don't be embarrassed to say it out loud, but a whisper will suffice, because Jesus sees us when we start to sink and knows we want to be saved, and he wants to save us more than we want to be saved. When you're sinking, call on Jesus, and he will be there, reaching out to lift you up and get you back in the boat, and Jesus will get in, too, where by his very presence, the storm will stop, peace will come, and we can get back on track, toward the shore, where we follow Jesus, help fulfill his purpose, and experience joy.

Listen closely and hear. Look hard and see. Take a risk and jump out of the boat to get closer. Walk on the water, and when you sink, call for help and Jesus will lift you up. Get back in the boat with him and worship the single person whose presence can still the storm and bring peace.

That sounds like a lot, and it is, but God gives us grace – that supernatural power – to see it through, not just once, but over and over again, because storms arise regularly, and Jesus calls

onto the waves, where he waits for us, waiting to save us when we sink, ready to lift us up back into the boat and still the storm so that we can know peace. Amen.