

Peace in the Storm

Matthew 14:22-33

Our scripture takes place after the feeding of the five thousand, which happened after Jesus had told the kingdom parables about mustard seeds and leaven faith, and about the greater value of finding the kingdom. Jesus had demonstrated the value and miracle of a little faith and willingness to share in the feeding of the crowd, where we saw Jesus as a prayerful and obedient servant utterly dependent on the word of God.

Now, Jesus and his disciples moved from the wilderness to the sea—from God's provision in the desert to God's deliverance through the waters. In today's scripture Jesus had sent his disciples away in their boat while he dismissed the crowds and spent time alone in prayer. In the early hours of the morning, when they were still far from land and being battered by the wind and waves, he appeared to them.

We have all heard this story numerous times, and a few years ago we did a winter book study based on this scripture. But, what might the Holy Spirit have to teach us anew, or reinforce, or just remind us, so we can share with others we meet this week?

One of the first things we notice is that Jesus went up the mountain by himself to pray. The image of Jesus taking time to pray, even in a very uncertain situation, is a reminder that things are never so turbulent or so urgent as to take us away from the necessity of prayer. We need to find our quiet place and take time to be alone with God in prayer.

Second, Jesus did not come immediately. The scripture says that when he had spent time alone, by that time the boat, battered by the waves, was far

from the land. The next verse says it was early in the morning when he came walking toward them on the sea. The disciples were in a perilous situation, though presumably not unfamiliar to the fishermen among them; but it was a time of danger.

Fear was very real for them. Matthew uses the phrases "terrified," "cried in fear," "do not be afraid," and "became frightened" all in just eleven verses. The cultural commonplace behind this incident was their belief, and that of the people around them, in a cosmic battle going on between God and the powers of evil. They may have understood the perilous sea as a manifestation of this battle. Without Jesus, the disciples were afraid of the battle and cried out in fear, because they were uncertain which way the struggle between God and evil would turn out.

Fear plays many roles in this story as it does in our lives. We have fear about our life, death, health, family, and finances. This week we have fear of whether that will be a nuclear war between North Korea and the United States. The disciples were afraid of the storm. We are afraid of whether we are safe in our own homes. We fear the known and mostly the unknown. Sometimes we do go through things – a difficult time for a period, but this does not mean that we get rescued immediately. Maybe there was a lesson to be learned or reinforced in such a situation.

Third, we learn that in our time of greatest need, Jesus is there for us. In their time of fear Jesus came and said take heart, it is I; don't be afraid. Jesus said *egō eimi*, which can mean simply "it is I;" but this Greek phrase is packed with significance. These are the words that the Septuagint uses to translate the Hebrew name of God revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Exod. 3:14). Jesus used the divine name to announce his presence. I AM is here, trampling victoriously over the waves. In these brief but charged words

and in the awesome vision that unfolds before the disciples, Jesus was identifying himself with God, the liberator and redeemer of Israel, who is at the same time the creator of the world and the victor over chaos.

Jesus' words, instilled courage and banished fear, assured the disciples that this awesome vision in the midst of the storm was intended as good news. Similar words were used by the prophet Isaiah, where God's self-revelation was accompanied by the instruction not to be afraid (e.g., Isa. 41:10, 13; 43:5; and esp. 43:1, 2, where it is explicitly linked with God's triumph over the waters). Given its utterance at important moments throughout Scripture, especially at the birth and resurrection of Jesus, "Do not be afraid" is a keynote of the gospel itself. The unveiling of God's majesty in Jesus was not intended to terrorize or diminish, but to save and uphold. When we are in the midst of our storms, Jesus brings grace and mercy to our situation. Jesus tells us that he is God's agent, and assures us that God's rule overcomes the power of evil.

Fourth, we learn from Peter there is nothing wrong with asking those big prayers. Jesus words of assurance seemed to be enough for the others in the boat in the storm; but for Peter, apparently it is not. Peter's request to walk on the water was tied to the question of Jesus' identity and power: "If it is you, command me to come to you on the water" (v. 28). Peter recognized Jesus, but wanted to know and experience more. "Come," said Jesus (v. 29), and Peter boldly stepped out of his comfort zone. Then he took his eyes off Jesus and focused on the elements instead. Soon he could only cry out for salvation from the waters, and Jesus reached out his hand and caught him (vv. 30-31, cf. Ps. 69:1-2).

Peter called him "Lord" without understanding that title's full significance. The lordship of Jesus is given specific content and meaning in

this incident: he is lord over the deep, over the wind and the waves and all the destructive forces that threaten to overwhelm human life. Jesus' actions here hold out the promise of a new exodus for his followers, a new entry into the land of promise, a new future. This is one of those moments, like the transfiguration, where the disciples gained some understanding and insight into Jesus' identity and mission. The whole event led up to a mighty confession of faith: "Truly you are the Son of God" (v. 33). **Iwan Russell-Jones**

What the Holy Spirit clearly wants us to learn from this passage is that we are called to step out in faith, even in the midst of troubled waters, if we are to be faithful to the call of Christ. Stepping out in faith is not a guarantee that we will not face troubled waters or be filled with fear, but it is always accompanied by the assurance that Jesus will not abandon us, that when we need it most, he will extend his arm to lift us up and get us back in the boat.

Years ago, one of the commentators attended an ecumenical gathering at which Ernest Campbell, then the pastor of Riverside Church in New York, was addressing a group of pastors on the crisis in churches. His assertion was that "the reason that we seem to lack faith in our time is that we are not doing anything that requires it." The key to faith and fullness of life in Christ is to follow Peter's example and be willing to step out of the comfort and security of the boat and head into the troubled waters of the world to proclaim the love, mercy, and justice of God that we find in Jesus Christ. Being a disciple is a risky and exciting business, but that is exactly what God calls us to do and to be, and God assures us that if we "get out of the boat," we can count on the accompaniment of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

William H. Willimon may have put it best in a sermon entitled "How Will You Know If It's Jesus?": If Peter had not ventured forth, had not

obeyed the call to walk on the water, then Peter would never have had this great opportunity for recognition of Jesus and rescue by Jesus. I wonder if too many of us are merely splashing about in the safe shallows and therefore have too few opportunities to test and deepen our faith. If we want to be close to Jesus, we have to venture forth out on the sea, we have to prove his promises through trusting his promises, through risk and venture.

Getting out of the boat in the storm with Jesus is the most risky, most exciting, and most fulfilling way to live life to the fullest. Matthew 14:22-33 invites us to do just that! **Clifton Kirkpatrick and Dock Hollingsworth**

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16).