

Matthew 14: 22-33

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear.

But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I: do not be afraid." Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." The word of the Lord!

OPENING PRAYER

God of Presence,
as you walked upon the water to meet the disciples,
meet us in the midst of the storms in our lives.

God of Renewal,
as you lifted Peter from the water,
lift us from despair to hope,
from distraction to focus,
from death to life.

God of the Journey,
direct us in your way,
work out your purpose in and through our lives.

We pray in the name of Christ who lives and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.

Swimming Lessons

August 13, 2017

Last Sunday we went with some of the Newdale kids over to the park for a picnic and then swimming in the pool. The younger children stayed mostly in the shallow end of the pool and they all had on their little floating things on their arms, water wings I think we used to call them, or had one of those noodles that you can wrap around you or hang on to. I remember one of the twins (Jocelyn, I think) was determined to get one of those noodles that had floated just beyond where she could get to it and still keep her feet on the bottom of the pool. You could tell by the look on her face that she was going to get it. But about half way there she couldn't feel the bottom anymore and began to bob under the water. We adults were about to jump up when she decided she couldn't do it and turned back towards the safer shallow water. She was taking on a little water and there was little bit of fear in her eyes as she spluttered to the edge of the pool. She had us a bit worried for a minute but she made it. And we were all calling out, "Don't be afraid. You're alright! You can make it."

She reminded me of Peter this morning. He really wanted to walk on that water and he was determined to do it. But sometimes our faith fails us, our focus on God waivers, our feet can't touch the bottom, and we begin to take on water and soon find ourselves sinking down, overwhelmed by life's circumstances. Even then God is with us the story assures us. He tells us to not be afraid. This is both faith and hope I guess. Our lives are filled with moments of trust and doubt and fear, a constant give and take in the daily walk of faith. For Matthew's

community, there is much symbolism in the stormy seas, the boat, and the disciples within. The boat is the church, and the disciples are the believers, and the stormy seas are the world all around them. And in the midst of this stormy sea comes Jesus, as he always does amidst the stormy seas of our lives, and that caught my attention this week.

Ask anyone who has been to this part of the world and they will tell you that storms like this can appear unexpectedly and with surprising strength. And while it may be something that some of these experienced fishermen were used to, it was still frightening and dangerous. I have memories of being on the lakes in Michigan as a child and riding in an aluminum motorboat that was moving over choppy water that scared the heck out of all of us. I can only imagine what this must have been like, and at night too.

And it reminds me that this is often what our lives are like as well. Storms appear when we least expect them and cause us to be afraid. A call in the night from the police, a fire breaks out next door, violence erupts at a rally, the doctor tells you that your cancer has spread, you turn on the news and hear that North Korea and the U.S. are threatening each other with annihilation, and you wonder if Jesus will be coming across the rough seas to help us out. It certainly has me asking some difficult questions about my faith and the hope I have in God's ability to pull me up from the depths of the angry seas of life. What about you? what do you do when you are paralyzed by fear? Is God there? Or are you feeling all alone? Does God hear our cries for help or is that just wishful thinking?

What do we do when it all seems hopeless? When you are bailing out the boat of your life just as fast as you can but the water keeps coming over the sides? When the kids are sick and the bills come due, when the diagnosis is terminal, when the tree hits the roof and the water is pouring in, when the addiction pulls you to the bottom of the sea. What do you say about that? And I find myself often feeling like Peter, at times full of faith and trust, jumping out of the boat into the rough seas, and other times feeling his doubt and failure when I don't keep my eyes on Jesus and sink like a stone.

And the gospel stories often have happy endings, don't they? People get healed, the storm gets calmed down, the child is resuscitated, the blind can see and the hungry are fed. But that isn't how our lives always turn out. And it seems to me that we often hear people cry out, "Lord, Save Me!" but then hear mostly silence.

So, what I'm feeling and questioning, is how do I experience this calm that comes from Jesus? When and how do I know that? In what ways do we hear and know God's peace and presence in our daily lives? I have a couple stories about that and maybe it will spark your imagination as well.

I guess for me it comes down to being still, even in the midst of chaos and fear. When I am feeling overwhelmed with the pressures of life and living, I know that I only experience Christ's peace when I sit and become silent for a moment and focus on him. That in those moments, I am centered and whole, even though I may come unglued moments later. But for a time, perhaps the length of time that Peter actually walked on the water, I am not afraid.

This week I have been feeling so distracted and stressed about some things that were happening in my life. By Friday I was feeling nearly overwhelmed and what I really wanted to do was either break something or sit and cry. While I was considering those options Friday morning, one of my cats, who rarely is affectionate, insisted that she sit in my lap. I took it as a sign, and so I sat, and she purred, and I prayed, and suddenly there was calm and peace again. It's probably no coincidence that her name is Mercy. God moves in mysterious ways and peace can be found in unusual moments if we are paying attention.

I went to a funeral of a friend of mine a couple weeks ago. She died of cancer. Her husband shared with us their deep love of the birds that surrounded their home. He told us that the day she died, a wood thrush, which

had never shown itself before, suddenly was sitting in front of her window. After she died he said, there were a pair of cardinals that came to rest on the hot tub where she had spent a good deal of her time as she eased her pain over the last few months. He knew that these were messages to him that not only was she ok, but that he would be ok, and know peace and love.

*When the storms of life are raging,
Stand by me;
When the storms of life are raging,
Stand by me.
When the world is tossing me
Like a ship upon the sea,
Thou who rulest wind and water,
Stand by me*

God can send us peace in so many ways if we have our hearts and eyes open. And perhaps it is true that this love of God is so profound and so permeates the lives of others that it can't help but be available to us when we are in the presence of others who love us as well. That it is this community of Love right here that often brings us peace and comfort. That it is our sisters and brothers in Christ who stand by us when all others run away.

There was a story on the internet about a young woman named Katie Lentz who was in a terrible car accident in Missouri. She was 19 years old at the time and she was hit head on by a drunk driver. The firemen and rescue personnel couldn't get her out of the car because they didn't have the right tools on site and things were not working the way they should.

Lentz was barely clinging to life and her vital signs were failing fast when she asked rescue crews to pray with her. That's when first responders say a man who looked like a Catholic priest seemed to appear out of nowhere, despite a 2-mile perimeter blocking the scene. The priest prayed with Lentz and anointed her with oil. At that point, according to the Fire Chief Raymond Reed, there was a calmness that seemed to come over the entire scene. Even the equipment started to work the way it should.

After the priest performed his duties, he left the scene. But his sudden disappearance only added to the air of mystery. In any of the nearly 70 photos or videos taken near the scene, the priest was nowhere to be seen. Which left many wondering whether he was an angel from above.

It wasn't long before the entire town and soon the country were searching for this seemingly heavenly hero who was dubbed the "angel priest." Lentz was eventually airlifted to a local hospital with broken legs and ribs.

The mystery priest turned out to be Robert Dowling who by chance was filling in for another local priest and happened upon the crash on his way home from celebrating Mass that morning. He had a chance to meet with Lentz later on in the intensive care unit.

"I told her I'm the priest who stopped by the site and she started to cry. I don't know why," Dowling said. "I think it was the most disappointing moment of all that I wasn't an angel or something."

While Lentz's savior might have salt and pepper hair instead of a halo, those closest to the teen say they still believe Dowling is an angel among men.

"Let's remember it was the All Mighty who loved that little girl so much and took such good care of her," he said.

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We all have storms in our lives, don't we? We all ride upon those deep waters that cause us fear and uncertainty. But what I've come to see and understand is that Jesus stands upon the waters of our fears...He rides above the dangerous waters of our lives...He calms the fierce winds, and should we begin to sink, he reaches out and grabs us. He grabs us with the love of others, sometimes a perfect stranger, or even through our animals and pets. He pulls us up both spiritually and physically in ways that will always be mysterious. And he gives us to each other, he gives us this community, this boat called the church. To hold each other up and pull each other out of the deep waters, to remind each other to, 'not be afraid.' To be water wings and floating noodles for all the world. Amen.