

August 17, 2014

TEXT: Matthew 14:22-33

TITLE: Words Amidst the Storm

Why is this story in the bible? It's a legitimate question. The gospel writers had a lot of material to choose from when they were composing their good news about Jesus Christ, so it is always appropriate to ask what the motivation is behind including a particular story or parable in the gospel. This is an epiphany story – a story that reveals to us who Jesus is, as the Son of God. In the book of Genesis, God subdued the unholy chaos and primordial waters in order to bring forth creation; here Jesus is also shown to have power over the storms and threatening waters. In the book of Exodus, God revealed God's name to Moses, saying "Yahweh – I am." When the disciples cry out in fear thinking Jesus was a ghost, he uses that same Old Testament language and says, "Take heart, I am. It is I," which firmly identifies him as One with God. And in Psalm 107, it talks about how the Lord "made the storm be still and the waves of the sea were hushed and then they were glad." This power of God is now seen as part of the identity of Jesus, God's Son. So that's why Matthew included this story in his gospel.

But why do we read this story? Why is this description of Jesus walking on the water and Peter stepping out of the boat during the storm something we find ourselves coming back to again and again? I think it is because we all face storms. We have all felt like we were sinking beneath angry waves. We all long for that hand of Jesus to reach out, catch us and help us get back into the boat of life. I'm pretty sure that is what makes this story so important to us today 2000 years after it was first written.

Before we talk about facing storms, I want you to notice that this is the only miracle by Jesus that directly affects one of the twelve disciples. Jesus raised his friend Lazarus from the dead and cast out demons from Mary Magdalene, but this is the only miracle physically involving one of the twelve disciples. We're told that Jesus healed a blind man, cured a paralytic, and restored a synagogue leader's dying daughter – but those acts were with nameless people out there in the community. Peter, on the other hand, is like a family member to us. Peter stepped out of the boat and walked on water. That's like one of us doing that, isn't it? Peter stepped out of the boat in the midst of the storm, battered by waves, while everyone in his immediate discipleship group was really scared. This one man called out to Jesus, trusted in Christ's command, and by the time everything was over, everyone in that little boat, in that discipleship family, believed in Jesus. What does that tell us? Never underestimate how a single person's actions of faith affect an entire community. Never doubt that your actions of faith will be seen by your family and how, through you, the people you love can come to lasting faith in Christ. Just as there have been people like Peter in your life who have modeled faith and righteousness for you, you too are Peter for someone else – someone in the cluster of people near at hand, afraid, unsure, that are looking to you for answers on how to survive life's storms.

One of the commentaries I read quoted a local pastor in Kenya named Timothy Njoya who was asked how he survived all the years of struggle and hardship during the reign of the corrupt Daniel Arap Moi government. He told the person, “I live in the present as though the reality of what will ultimately be already is.”¹ We walk by faith, not by sight. We live in the present trusting in Christ whose power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine. (Ephesians 3:20) And the truth is, when we do so, others notice.

Now, let's talk about storms. Every life contains storms – in fact, I'd wager that each one of us could name a personal storm we're facing right now. It may not be a thunderstorm, but everyone's dealing with something. There are physical storms, financial storms, emotional storms; just listening to the news reminds us how battered by storms our entire world is. There's the Ebola virus in Liberia. Renewed American bombing in Iraq. Standoffs between Russia and Ukraine. Again, those may seem to affect nameless people out there, but we know each of those storms has the potential to touch our lives directly. And what about other recent storms that feel like they are happening to our immediate family? For example, Robin Williams' suicide: a gifted, beloved comedian who battled with depression and ended his own life. Many of us right here also battle with depression, anxiety, and chronic grief. I don't have an easy answer for the serious issue of depression. But I will say that the church has to be a safe place where people can say when they are struggling with depression – and a place where we commit simply to sit beside one another when they don't have the strength to get up and walk by themselves. Any healthy movement forward when dealing with a mental illness or depression is always a shared movement.

There's another example of family storms in the news now - the sad saga playing out in Ferguson, Missouri. An unarmed African American youth was shot dead by police. Another name, Michael Brown, added to the long litany of African American males killed on our city streets. The initial response by the police embodied our worst fears, as local protesters and people of faith were confronted with a military-style show of force. As the messy details of this whole incident emerge, don't lose sight of the fact that this is a racism problem. A largely white police force responded to justified protests in a largely African American community by using tear gas, body armor and battle dress. Suddenly images we've seen from other places in the world, like war-torn Gaza, are shown in our nightly news, involving fellow Americans who are part of our family. This injustice was only recently corrected when an African American police chief was put in charge and who had the courage to step out of the boat, step away from the Ferguson, Missouri armored vehicles, and walk amongst the crowd. But let us not be complacent about Ferguson's problems as if they are far removed from life here in Pittsburgh. Remember that annually 80% of homicide victims in Pittsburgh are African American. And only 15% of our police force is African American. More troubling is that since 2001, out of 440 police officers hired in Pittsburgh, only 17 have been African American.² The storm never just affects people out there; it's always close at hand.

My theology professor from Princeton, Daniel Migliore, once wrote that “faith is not like finding shelter from the storm in a safe harbor. It is more like going out from the harbor to face the storm.”³ Why is this story from Matthew’s gospel in the bible? Because it tells us about Jesus, the Son of God, the one able to calm all storms. Because it reminds us that Jesus sends us ahead of him to do his work, even though the road we will travel involves risks and trouble and real storms. And because when we pull out of our safe harbors and follow where Jesus leads, it is there we discover faith – it is there we are held by the strong hand of God – it is there we are saved.

Too often we have the formula of faith backwards. We say, “If Christ does this or that, then I will believe and trust in Jesus.” If Christ first calms the storm, quiets the waves, then I’ll step out of the boat and walk toward him. No, it is just the reverse: by walking toward Christ in the midst of the storm, we discover then that He is trustworthy and able to hold you up and sustain you no matter what. The laws of gravity, chemistry and physics are true and active all around us, but we are the ones who prove their truth through scientific experiments in the lab. In the same way, the laws of faith are true and trustworthy and active all around us. But we prove the truth of faith by stepping out in the storms, by risking and protesting and working for the kingdom of God that will ultimately be yet already is.

Ernest Campbell, the former pastor of Riverside Church in New York, once asserted that “the reason we seem to lack faith in our time is that we are not doing anything that requires it.”⁴ What are you and I doing right now that requires faith? What is our church doing right now that requires faith? What is Pittsburgh doing and America doing right now that requires faith? There are answers to that question – and yes, people are daily battling storms, living with depression, caring for others with a patience and love and grace that comes as a gift of God and not from their own power. Yet in the end, we still need to hold onto this story – because storms keep coming and we need to get out of the boat and walk toward the only One who truly controls the wind and waves and tempests of this life.

That is why when we decide to leave our safe harbors and step out onto rough waters – personally, emotionally, economically, politically, spiritually – we need to remember from this story the words that were spoken amidst that storm long ago – words still spoken to us amidst our storms today. When we’re anxious, Christ still says, “Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid.” When we see where we should go but are afraid to take a step forward, Jesus (who is already there where we’re heading) says calmly yet firmly, “Come.” And when we feel overwhelmed, as if the odds of life are stacked against us and the waves are too high, Jesus’ hand is extended to us and catches us and he says, “Why did you doubt?” And after everything, the storm will cease. But that’s basically an after-thought, for what we truly needed came to us in the midst of the storm. So hold onto that bit of good news from this gospel: We are to look for Christ, trust in Christ, and listen to Christ in the midst of every storm. AMEN.

¹ Preaching God's Transforming Justice, Year A, Matthew 14:22-33, p. 347-348.

² Sources include "Violence in Allegheny County" report and New Pittsburgh Courier articles reporting on homicides and ACLU discrimination case against Pittsburgh police.

³ Daniel Migliore, Princeton Seminary Bulletin, XV, 1 (1994), p. 48.

⁴ Quoted by Clifton Kirkpatrick, Feasting on the Word, Proper 14: Matthew 14:22-33, *Pastoral Perspective*, pp. 334, 336.