

Wesley United Methodist Church

August 9, 2020

Walking or Sinking

Scripture: Matthew 14:22-33

The Sea of Galilee is surrounded by mountains that create wind tunnels where storms arise suddenly. The disciples knew that. Some of them were fishermen; they had spent most of their lives on this sea fishing and dealing with the storms. But things were different on this day.

They had all participated in the feeding of a multitude of people. A miracle that began with only 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish and ended up feeding more than 5,000 men, plus women and children – so more like 10 – 15,000 people. When everyone was done eating, they collected 12 baskets of left-over food. It had been a great day!

But now it was nighttime. Jesus had sent them off in the boat and had gone up into the mountain by himself to pray. But during the night one of those storms came up and the boat was getting battered by the wind. Jesus had come down from the mountain and saw the boat with his friends in it battling the storm. Rather than continue his walk around the lake to meet them in the morning, he began to walk to them on the sea.

Things are always more frightening at night and especially during a storm, so when the disciples saw Jesus walking toward them, they thought he was a ghost. But immediately, Jesus spoke to them and assured them that it was he. Peter, the impetuous disciple who always seemed to speak first and think later, said, “If it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” Jesus said, “Come”. And Peter climbed out of the boat and started to walk toward Jesus.

He walked with confidence and when he reached Jesus, they started to dance together on the water. The other disciples seeing what happened climbed out of the boat and began to walk, and dance, and run toward Jesus and Peter. Soon, they were all gathered on the sea, having their own private party and celebrating how just hours before they had been part of a miracle serving a whole crowd of people. They laughed and joked, forgetting about the raging storm. They slapped each other on the back and

celebrated how great they were and then when their adrenaline had started to fade they made their way to the boat, climbed aboard, the storm stopped and they all settled down for a nap.

Well, that's not exactly how Matthew tells it, is it? In fact, it's not even close. But wouldn't that have been a great story? And it could have happened that way, couldn't it?

But if it had, that's all it would have been – a great story, a wonderful miracle and a great celebration of how wonderful the disciples were. What lessons might we take from such a story? Well, we might think about how we needed Jesus to help a little to get things started, but then we did such a great job, we were so good, we accomplished so much; we might start to forget that it was really all about Jesus and think it was all about us and how great we were.

And quite frankly, that just doesn't fit with most of our lives. If the story had gone that way, it wouldn't be a story about us. We are much more like the real disciples. The ones who were scared in the storm; the ones who thought they saw a ghost. We are more like Peter – a mixture of faith and doubt, a mixture of courage and fear, a mixture of enthusiasm and, unlike Peter, many of us also have a sense of caution.

I saw a post on Facebook recently that said "Can we all agree that in 2015 not a single person got the answer right to where do you see yourself in 5 years." We didn't expect to find ourselves in the middle of a raging pandemic. We didn't expect to find ourselves in the middle of nightly demonstrations about civil rights, justice and equity. We didn't expect to find ourselves worshipping at home instead of in our churches, or home-schooling children, or not hugging the people we love. We didn't expect to find ourselves in the eye of a storm that just doesn't want to quit.

This story is about far more than just one miraculous event that happened a very long time ago. It is a sign and a symbol of what Jesus always does.

The storms of life are real. We know that. We all experience them but generally in smaller doses or more localized. In the middle of the global and national storms around us, people are still facing their own personal storms: diagnoses of cancer, or other illness, unemployment, relationships falling apart, disagreements among family

members, children and others making decisions that we wish they wouldn't make, just to name a few.

The wind is howling around us. The waves are rocking our boats and we cry out to anyone who will listen, "Help me, protect me, save me." To us, just as to the disciples and Peter, Jesus appears with an outstretched hand, ready for us to grab hold, ready to help save us, ready to be with us even in the fiercest storm.

Because the reality is that it's pretty nearly impossible to do all of this on our own or we pay a pretty high price when we try to do so. And the good news is that we don't have to struggle on our own because Jesus does come to us in the middle of the storms of life, his hand stretched out to us, his voice clear, inviting us to take hold of him and not to be afraid.

I want to be clear about a couple of things. I believe that storms are real and I do not believe that God stops them or prevents us from experiencing the storms of life.

As Covid 19 started to become a nasty storm, I saw people attending churches and insisting that it was okay because God was going to protect them. In one particular interview I watched a woman leaving church insisting that God would put a shield or wall around everyone who believed so that we wouldn't get sick. If people did get sick it was because they did not believe enough.

Now, I don't claim to have a direct line to God, but I categorically reject that line of thinking. I hope it was comforting to her, but I am also all too aware that some of these crowded worship services became super spreaders and there are churches that experienced the illness and death of many of their members who believed that they could do whatever they wanted and God would protect them.

I think, quite frankly, that Jesus' death is one of the greatest proofs of the reality that in general, God does not sweep in and put a magic bubble around us to insulate us and protect us from the consequences of our actions. Jesus aggravated the wrong people (or the right people, depending upon how you look at it) and the consequence of that was Jesus' painful horrible death on a cross.

However, that wasn't the end. God raised Jesus from the dead, and offers all of us the promise of eternal life. This is one of the reasons why we are able to celebrate the lives of those we love when they die, even when our hearts are breaking. Our

hearts are breaking for us, for our sadness, for the way we will miss the person we have loved, but at the same time, we often may experience a peace or a confidence that our loved one is being received into God's loving arms.

Apart from earthly death, there are many storms that we face in life. In the midst of the literal wind and rainstorm, Peter had enough faith to want to go to Jesus on the water. He had enough faith to step out of the boat, but then at some point, he took his eyes off Jesus and once again saw the storm, became afraid, remembered that he was human and can't walk on water, and he started to sink. However, rather than thrash around and try to save himself, he remembered what was really important in his life, and he called out to Jesus, "Save me."

Earlier in our prayer time, as Dan led the Lord's prayer, he said, "When you don't know what to pray, when you don't know what to say, just say, 'Our Father...'" That is just like Peter calling out to Jesus to save him. When we don't know what to pray, when we don't know what to say, all we need to do is call on God, and just as in this magnificent story about storms on the water, Jesus will be right there, reaching out his hand, ready to save us, to walk with us, to be with us right in the middle of the storm.

There have been many many people praying about Covid 19, and I imagine that there are some who wonder why God hasn't just zapped the virus away. There are others who believe that God is using this as a punishment for any variety of things with which they think God is angry at us. I believe that in the middle of this storm, God is with us.

Some of you will remember the movie, "The Perfect Storm". It was a true story about a storm off the New England coast. As I recall, essentially, it involved several different meteorological events coming together to form a super storm. Sometimes it seems that we are in the midst of our own "Perfect Storm" right now. Covid-19 has highlighted social inequities. The killing of George Floyd ignited protests about racial inequality. The economic consequences, the political controversies, concerns about whether or not children should be going back to school, all these come together to put us right in the middle of a very nasty storm.

In the middle of this storm, we don't have any easy answers. Teachers, health care workers, truck drivers, housekeeping staffs, retail employees, grandparents,

parents, children – we are all caught in this storm together and as much as some like to proclaim we are in this together, it often feels as if we are fighting each other in it.

When you don't know what to pray, when you don't know what to say, when you don't know what to do, look to Jesus, call out to Jesus, reach out to Jesus. As Matthew tells us, "Immediately, Jesus reached out and grabbed him." Jesus does the same for us.

When we face the difficulties of life, God is there. When God calls us to something new, to a new kind of ministry, to a new job, to a new relationship, we can be confident that God will hold our hand. We may still face storms and there will be times that we are afraid of the storms, but Jesus still reaches out to us and offers us his hand, and saves us from drowning in our fears, or our doubts. Jesus walks with us through them and into a place of greater calm.

As we close in prayer, I want to share with you a prayer that I read this week by a colleague, Steve Garnaas-Holmes.

Let us pray,

Serene One, when the wind is against me, battering, it is you who walks on the sea of my troubles. When I am panicked, you are the one who says, "Do not be afraid. It is I." On the waves of my heart you stand firm and calm them, not with magic, but with your presence, "It is I."

Not escaping them, not after they are stilled, but still raging, you invite me into the waves of suffering and injustice. I do not calm them, I stand firm, not by my ability, but by hanging on to you, even when, as I shall be, I am sinking.

It is you who hold me up, you who are steady in my fear, you who heal the turbulence. Over the waters of chaos, even before, "Let there be light," you said, "It is I."ⁱ

Amen.

ⁱ Garnaas Holmes, Steve. "It is I" published in his daily meditation "Unfolding Light" 8/3/2020