

August 9, 2020
Twenty First Sunday of Online Worship

Wading in the Waters – Last of Series

Rev. Jacob Snowden

A Battered Boat and Staying Afloat

1 Kings 19:9-18

Matthew 14:22-33

The Word of the Lord from Matthew, chapter 14
verses 22 through 33:



Henry Ossawa Tanner, "Disciples See Christ Walking on the Water"

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 God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. Let us pray:

In our doubts and worry, Lord reach out to us, hold us in your love and grace. Amen.

What do you see coming out to you as our boats are tossed by this craziest of summers? Take heart, it is Jesus calling out to us, encouraging us to do miraculous things, ready to take hold of us if we fail.

Once upon a time, before Sara and I had our daughter, Gwyneth, we went to dinner with some of Sara's co-workers. Another couple, Aimee and Matt, had a son who was toddling around. Matt put his son on a pool table behind where we were eating and said, "I think my kid has a death wish." The boy would toddle as fast as he could to the edge of the pool table, ready to dive to the

floor just as Matt would catch him. Matt had a bead of sweat on his brow, but his son had a big, giggling, mostly toothless grin on his face.

I wonder what it must be like to have such a deep sense of safety that someone will catch us, that for a moment we can be completely free of anxiety. Is it too much cotton candy to believe that a fear of falling or failing can be entirely replaced by the joy and security of a loving embrace?

Today is the final Sunday in our Wading in the Water series, and what would be more fitting than this scripture, where we see Peter not only wading but walking on the water? Spoiler alert... we also see him sinking in the water. As Susan has been on sabbatical, we have been considering the ways water reminds us of God's creativity, redemption, and revelation that flow around us and wash over us. This text captures all three—we see Christ's command over creation, we see the redemption of a doubting Peter, and we see Jesus revealed as one who reaches out to us and lifts us up. But before Jesus lifts us up, we have to wade in!

This story comes immediately on the heels of Jesus feeding the 5,000. While Jesus goes up a mountain to pray, the disciples, we read, are working against a headwind, their boat is being battered and tormented by the waves. Unlike the story just a few chapters earlier, in Matthew 8, where Jesus is asleep on the boat, the disciples are alone. Notably, they do not appear to be alarmed by rough seas. Instead, and this is my literal translation, they are shaken as a phantom approaches them during the fourth watch of the night.

Sensing their fear Jesus says, "Take heart, it is I." Some commentators note that Jesus responds "*ego eimi*," a Greek version of the Hebrew name God gave to Moses at the burning bush, which means "I am."

Last week I ordered dinner from a food truck in my neighborhood. One of the workers asked, "Who is number 18?" I raised my hand and said, "I am." So either Jesus is claiming to be God, or his tacos are ready. I will leave that to your interpretation.

Peter, wanting confirmation, and very possibly being amazed at Jesus' wondrous water walking, asks to be called out on the water. Jesus calls. Peter gets out of the boat and starts to walk until he recognizes the strong wind. When he begins to sink he cries out. Then Jesus catches him and asks, "*You of little faith, why did you doubt me,*" and they return to the boat where the other disciples worship Jesus. I picture this image like a child on a bicycle without training wheels. Everything is going fine until the child recognizes mom or dad isn't holding onto the seat any longer and... CRASH!

What I have enjoyed most about this passage, one reason we have been considering "Wading in the Water" as our theme, is that this story asks what faith looks like when we are without something firm to stand on. You can read fear all over this story. Literally in four verses "fear" appears four times. While I don't imagine anyone from a year ago could have anticipated 2020 would turn out like it has, I am glad to know this story gives us a warning that instability and fear are regular parts of the life of faith. As you try to navigate the uncharted waters of this year, here are a few observations from this story that I hope might be a help.

First, faith doesn't guarantee progress in a straight line. This story gives the disciples a boat and a head start on Jesus. However, between head-winds and turbulent tides, the disciples spend all night without getting much of anywhere. Jesus doesn't chastise the disciples for being bad sailors, even though a number of them are fishermen. He catches up to them and when the turbulence dies down, he continues with them. If they are crossing the Sea of Galilee, this really is a three hour tour gone awry.

Second, Jesus is hard to recognize...especially out of context. I really enjoyed an article by Jennifer Leath, a Yale Divinity student who used this story to talk about her involvement with the ecumenical movement and the World Council of Churches. She used the boat as a metaphor for church as she knew it. She was convinced Jesus was calling her beyond the church she knew to see other ways of walking by faith. Fear is what keeps the disciples from stepping out or recognizing the surprising ways Christ comes to them. How might we be called beyond church as we know it? How can we recognize Jesus in our troubled waters?

The life of faith has a million transitions. This story is literally about the disciples transitioning from one town to another. More than that, in these few short verses, readers transition from a mountain... to the sea. The disciples move from fear... to faith, from doubt... to worship. I hope it is not too cliché of me to point out that faith is about these parts of a journey, not only about a destination. Did you notice that Peter seems to sink between two [relatively] safe places: the boat and Jesus. Jennifer Leath (again) writes that Peter is called, "between the boat and Jesus [where] there seemed to be an empty forsakenness, there seemed to be dangerous sea, there seemed to be a frightening [recognition] of our own gravity and the power of natural elements." Transitions or in-between spaces are anxiety, doubt, and fear ridden.

As we transition from summer to fall, into a new month dealing with COVID; and as we move closer to an election, what resources help us transition from fear to faith, from doubt to worship?

Now we come to Peter, the rock of the church who sinks... like a rock of the church. Peter teaches us a deep lesson (if you'll excuse the pun)--failure and faith are not diametrically opposed. There is a space where our anxieties, doubts, and fear pull us down. From the depths we cry to God who hears us. Peter helps us to grow comfortable with risk, if not failure. Clifton Kirkpatrick recounts the story of hearing the pastor of Riverside Church, New York, Ernest Campbell, saying, "The reason that we seem to lack faith in our time is that we are not doing anything that requires it."

The middle of a storm is not the best time to get out of the boat! Do the only thing that makes sense—stay in the boat! We recognize by common sense and healthy self-understanding that we have limitations—gravity and natural elements collide. Come on, Peter!

Yet Peter heard Christ's call. Peter is willing to step out beyond his capabilities, to share in the impossible if only for a split second. Rather than accepting what seems like good, common sense—racism is intractable, poverty insurmountable, and the more things change the more they stay the same—I wonder how we might hear Christ's call. Can we take a step of faith even when we don't feel "grounded?"

Will Willimon wrote:

“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 [revelation] 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.”

Sure, Peter sank like a rock. But hear the good news, God forgives us when we fail and falter. Christ comes to us in surprising ways. God challenges us to do the impossible, and that little bit of faith that Peter has is just enough to help us see that sinking and deepening might just be a part of the same process.

If Peter tried to walk on water, surely we can find a way to wade in. In this story, over the last several weeks, can you trust that God is Lord of creation, redeeming all of creation, and revealing a wondrous love for us?

As William Carey, the 18th century missionary said, “Expect great things from God, attempt great things for God!”