

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Matthew 14:22-33

²² Immediately he made the disciples get into a boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³ And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴ but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵ And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶ But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. ²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

²⁸ Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." ²⁹ He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and, beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" ³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" ³² When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³ And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

"It's three o'clock in the morning, We've danced the whole night thru." This is a line in the lyrics to a song titled "Three O'clock in the Morning," sung by Dorothy Terriss. In the song, three o'clock in the morning is a late time, good time, dancing time and romancing time. But when most of us think about 3:00 A.M., we're not thinking of the "best of times" but more like the "worst of times."

Three o'clock is more often associated with insomniacs, worry warts, and social deviants. If you can't sleep, 3:00 A.M. is tossing-and-turning time. If someone isn't home by 3:00 A.M., it becomes floor-pacing time. If the telephone rings at 3:00 A.M., it's palm-sweating time. If people are out in the streets at 3:00 A.M., it's up-to-no-good time. And 3:00 A.M. is not a good time to be awakened by sounds like rumbling stomachs, snoring dripping faucets, thunderstorms and furry things crawling in the walls.

In this morning's text, it's about 3:00 A.M. and the disciples are in a boat on the sea, and they are caught in a storm, without Jesus. This story about Jesus walking on water takes place after the amazing miracle when Jesus fed 5,000 plus people. The story is also recorded in Mark 6:45-52 and John 6:16-21. However, in Mark and John, nothing is ever said about Peter getting out of the boat and walking on the water.

There's another story about the disciples getting caught in a storm while they were out to sea on a boat. That story is found earlier in Matthew 8:18 and verse 23. In that story, Jesus "gave orders to the disciples to cross to the other side of the lake." As they prepare to do that, Jesus has an encounter with a teacher of the law. But then, Jesus joins his disciples and leaves with them in the boat. They set out to sea and encounter a furious storm which seems to have no effect on Jesus. He, in fact, fell asleep in the boat. The disciples eventually woke him up where upon they asked Jesus to save them.

In the story we heard today, Jesus made the disciples get into the boat to sail to the other side of the sea, while he dismissed the crowds that they just fed. "Made," more accurately translated here means "to force" or "to compel." Jesus did not give them the option to stay with him or to wait on him. He compelled them to go without him.

We might wonder why Jesus did not illicit the help of the disciples to disburse the crowds. They were willing to help Jesus get rid of the people even before they fed them, but

Jesus would not have that. He fed the people first; and then he sent the disciples away, and dismissed the crowds on his own.

Finally, Jesus was alone which is exactly what he wanted. While he is on the mountaintop, his disciples, out on the sea in their boat, get lost in the chaos of a raging storm. Jesus, on the other hand, was alone because he needed time with his Father. Even the One we know as "God With Us" needed time with God. This is significant to note because it reminds us of Christ's divinity, and it reminds us that it is God who is Jesus' source of power and strength. Jesus stays alone on the mountain from evening to the early morning. By that time, the disciples, had been swept far offshore.

We can envision them. Frightened by the storm, fighting the wind and the waves, and exhausted from having done so. The sea can be a very scary place, especially when it is storming. The disciples find themselves there because Jesus sent them out on the sea, and they obediently went, without Jesus. The sea separates them from him. Surely, they remembered how he was there for them once before when they were on the stormy seas, and wished he was there to help them again. They were alone, in the midst of the chaos of the storm, alone in their boat, a fragile craft preserving them from the pounding hazards of the storm.

Reflecting on these events, we can connect with what the disciples were likely feeling. When we consider the storm to be the unwanted, frightening, painful, tumultuous times in our lives, we can relate to the feelings of anxiety and fear they certainly had to be feeling. We may even feel abandoned or angry by God, maybe because the chaos in our lives is related to our obedience to God, maybe because we feel we don't deserve what we're going through because we follow Jesus, or because we are feeling overwhelmed by the negative stuff happening in our lives and we just can't seem to find or feel God's presence.

If we allow the boat and the disciples together in the boat to represent the church, we can recognize that we are not alone in facing the storms of life. We can turn to one another for prayer, encouragement and empathy that will carry us through the storms that arise in our personal lives.

Some of the storms that arise are not personal. The disciples were facing this particular storm together. Unfortunately today, the church, as a whole, gets caught in the chaos of the world. The church is sent out to be the light in a world overcome by the darkness of ignorance, violence and injustice. We are sent out onto the seas of the world. It gets stormy sometimes, and sadly, some of the issues that divide society, find a way to divide the body of the church. Quite honestly, some boats sink when this is allowed to happen. It is our central community focus on God; and our love for one another, Godly love, not love as the world describes it, but Godly love steeped deeply and spiritually at our core in values of respect, commitment, service to one another that keeps the boat sailing.

But today's story does not end with a sinking boat. We find that Jesus shows up. It was about the three o'clock hour which should tell us that it's never too late for Jesus' help to arrive. Of course, we need to look for Jesus, and we need to be willing to recognize him. The disciples did not recognize him at first. When they saw someone walking on water, they thought it was a ghost.

Surely, we can understand how it would seem impossible for Jesus to get to them, especially under the stormy conditions and because they had drifted far offshore. Who would ever imagine that he could walk on water to get to them? They believed only God could do that. And yet Jesus did.

Here's where it helps us to remember that Jesus found his strength and power in God. Remember, he spent time alone, on a mountaintop to pray, to be with and to be refueled by God.

This connection reminds us that the Father and the Son are one. Jesus then, walking on water, represents to us that God, finds us and comes to our rescue. Even in the latest and darkest time of the night, God, overcomes the power of chaos to be with us and save us.

So now, what are we to think about Peter and his role in this story. As Jesus got closer to the boat, Jesus senses the disciples fear and he tells them not to be afraid, it is I. He did not say, I'm Jesus, he said, "It is I." The commentaries I used to study this text say this is also significant. It connects to those times in the bible when God identifies himself as "I Am."

In Exodus God spoke to Moses from the burning bush, calling him to the mission of freeing God's people. Moses questioned his ability to do this, and he questioned whether the Israelites would question his authority and leadership. God first identifies himself as "I Am who I Am," and he tells Moses to tell the Israelites that, "'I am has sent me to you.'" Jesus, in his saying, "it is I" as he approaches the disciples, was saying that God was with them; and he says to us that God is with us.

Still Peter seems to question whether the "ghost" was indeed Jesus. We tend to judge Peter as being impulsive, and later failing at things. It really is unfair to put this label on him; because most likely, in actuality, his thoughts and feelings were very likely the same as what the other disciples were thinking and feeling, he just happened to voice them. We might be quick to say that Peter seemed to be testing Jesus by saying, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." But couldn't it just be that he, like everyone else in the boat, couldn't tell for sure that it was Jesus, and wanted to make sure it was him.

Peter had a good understanding of who Jesus was and what he could do, he even had faith. So, he believed that if he stepped out of the boat after Jesus told him to come, he would not sink. And, at first he did not sink into the darkness of the water. But as he stepped further away from the boat, he sank into the water. Seeing the violence of the storm around him, he became overwhelmed and took his focus off of Jesus, and sank. That is until Jesus reached for Peter and saved him. When Jesus and Peter got back into the boat, the storm ended.

Say what you will about Peter, but at least he knew who he could turn to for help. He wasn't afraid to get out of the boat, he knew who he could turn to for help. Even though he began to sink, he must have known on some level that if he did start to sink, Jesus would help him. Some people never get out of the boat because they don't have faith that Jesus will be there if they do happen to start sinking.

We hear then that Jesus said to Peter, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" This statement can be misinterpreted. We might conclude that Peter failed to have enough faith to make it possible for him to walk on water. The Interpreter's bible commentary directs our understanding away from this defeatist thinking. These are the interpretations of the text that is offered in this commentary:

"The message is not 'If he (Peter) had had enough faith, he could have walked on the water,' just as the message to us is not, 'If we had enough faith, we could overcome all our problems in spectacular ways.' **This interpretation is wrong in that it identifies faith with spectacular exceptions to the warp and woof of our ordinary days, days that are all subject to the laws of physics and biology.** This is wrong because our fantasies of overcoming this web are shattered by the realities of accident, disease, aging, and circumstances and we begin to sink, this view encourages us to feel guilty because of our 'lack of faith.'"

It is so often the truth that when the results we desire for the storms in our lives are not of our choosing, say, spectacular in nature, we are quick to conclude that it was our lack of faith that was the problem. Faith is not about being able to walk on water, only God can do that, but it

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is about believing that God is in the boat, and even out of the boat, with you despite all the evidence to the contrary, as you make your way through the storm.

Robert Louis Stevenson tells of a storm that caught a vessel off a rocky coast and threatened to drive it and its passengers to destruction. In the midst of the terror, one daring man, contrary to orders, went to the deck, made a dangerous passage to the pilot house and saw the steersman, at his post holding the wheel unwaveringly, and inch by inch, turning the ship out, once more, to sea. The pilot saw the watcher and smiled. Then, the daring passenger went below and gave out a note of cheer: "I have seen the face of the pilot, and he smiled. All is well."

Even at the dreaded, stormy hour of 3:00 A.M., when it is darkest and we are weary, when the sea is so wide and the boat is so small, when it's too dark to see, or worse yet, too dark to hope, God is with us, and God will see us through the storm. Amen.