

Matthew 14, August 2020 Jesus amidst the storm

This morning we have a story about storms at sea and the peril those storms bring to those on the sea. The body of water involved is the Sea of Galilee, which sounds impressive, but is actually less than 1% the size of Lake Superior by surface area. So, not nearly as imposing as the vast body of water that is neighbor to all of us, but the Sea of Galilee was long and narrow, and winds sweeping down it in the right direction created dangerous conditions. As people living alongside our own inland Sea, we understand the dual nature of large bodies of water; the Lake provides cool breezes in the summer, fish for eating, extraordinary beauty and recreational opportunities, but as we also all know well-- people *die* on this Lake. The first funeral recorded in our old church registry, in 1927, was the drowning of a fisherman. Every summer we hear about people getting in trouble on the Lake, needing to be rescued or actually drowning. The Lake is dangerous! Some of us have been out in stormy waters. Others of us have seen the crashing waves from the shore during a nor-easter. It is not hard for us to imagine the terror, the exhaustion, and the sense of being up against unbeatable odds that people in such situations must feel. The disciples in our Gospel lesson, out in a storm on the sea of Galilee, felt this way. And of course, ideally, they shouldn't have been out in their boat in such a stormy sea. But, they were there for a reason: Jesus had *made* them go out, our text tells us. And that word for "made" implies a forceful compelling. Jesus *compels* his disciples out into stormy waters? What is that all about?

Right before our miraculous text this morning, Jesus has performed another miracle on this same day, the feeding of the 5000 with a few fish and loaves of bread. That was our Gospel

text last week. It was a massive crowd, a big miracle, and a long day, made longer because it began for Jesus with news of the death of his kinsman and fellow prophet, John the Baptist. Our text picks up just as the people are finishing up eating, before they have left, actually. We read, “Immediately Jesus made—compelled- the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, while he dismissed the crowds.” So, while the bread eaters are still brushing the crumbs off their robes, the disciples are being insistently told to cross the sea ahead of Jesus. We might wonder why? Why doesn’t Jesus have them help him dismiss the crowds and then they could all cross together in the boat, if cross they must?

Basically, it seems that Jesus was looking for some downtime by himself here. He longs to go up the mountain by himself to pray and sort things out. He *needs* this time, and he creates it. And there’s a lesson for us here-- if *Jesus* needs some down time and solitary time to pray, rest, and recharge, maybe we shouldn’t feel bad or guilty about needing such time either---unless we think we’re tougher than God? There is no shame in taking care of ourselves. But, while Jesus is praying and evening falls, the situation is deteriorating for his friends in their boat on the sea. In fact, they are in perilous waters, waves crashing, the wind against them, and far from land. We gain perhaps some new perspective on this familiar story by digging a little into the original Greek of this text. When we read in our text that by the evening the boat was *battered* by waves, the word for battered, “*basanizo*”, literally means torture, torment or harassment; there is a great intensity to this storm; it’s like being tortured or tormented. And when we read that the wind was *against* them, the adjective for the wind, “*enantios*”, suggests opposition or hostility. So, while storms are a force of nature with an impersonal quality, there

was nevertheless a sense of hostility, of opposition, in the nature of these wind and waves as the disciples struggled against them.

It certainly doesn't require much imagination for us to picture ourselves in the present circumstances of the world as passengers in a frail craft amidst a large and angry sea. Between the pandemic itself, the economic fall out, the horrendous political polarization, the racial unrest, the confusion about schools in the fall, the uncertainty of what is to come, we experience wave after wave crashing up against our small boat. That doesn't even take into account whatever personal challenges we might have right now apart from the larger picture. This story is *our* story. We know what it means to feel that circumstance after circumstance goes against us; to feel that the world is truly a hostile place, where we are opposed on every level and beset by problems, troubles, and trials. And so often, these kinds of troubles come at us all at once, so that we seem to be surrounded by wind and waves and feel completely overwhelmed.

So, we can understand what the disciples in that small boat on the storm-tossed sea must feel: terror, exhaustion, and the sense of facing unconquerable odds. They feared for their lives and rightly so. It might seem that things could hardly get any worse, but they do. Their fear turns to utter terror when a ghostly figure draws closer to them, walking on the water. In their fear and exhaustion, they didn't at first recognize their Lord. And here is another lesson for us—when we are in that place where fear and exhaustion overwhelm us, everything we perceive is colored by that fear and exhaustion. We don't even recognize the familiar and loved, but can easily just see another cause for anxiety, anger, or threat. Under such circumstances—perhaps our circumstances now—we may tend to be a wee bit over reactive and defensive, perceiving

threat even where there is none. Just a good thing to keep in mind, especially as the pandemic worsens and the November elections get closer. Fear tends to warp our ability to see things clearly. Knowing this, and knowing their fear, Christ immediately speaks and says, “Take heart; it is I. Have no fear.”

Here is where things get quite interesting, of course, because Peter decides to get out of the boat. We know this story very well, but stick with me---we’re about to think outside the box here. Typically, we approach this text by seeing Peter as stepping out in faith, but sinking once he takes his eyes off Jesus. It seems an admirable attempt on his part. That approach to the text works. *On the other hand*, it is also completely reasonable to consider this text from a new angle, asking this question—*should* Peter have gotten out of the boat? Did he have any business doing so? What is he trying to prove?

Think this through with me. And keep in mind that the boat was the earliest symbol for the Christian church. And the seas represented chaos to the people of Bible times. The early church was indeed a small boat out in stormy seas. Remnants of this ancient theology remain in church architecture, where the main part of the sanctuary is called the nave, like the underside of a boat. Returning to our story, things are very difficult for the disciples on those stormy seas of chaos, yes---but they were directed there by their Lord, they were still afloat, and they were all together in the same boat. Much like the early Christian church, facing waves of persecution. And much perhaps like our own times---not that we are so much facing *that* kind of persecution, but the church *is* struggling in stormy seas, as are most of us personally, right about now. Jesus was walking towards the boat, *he* was coming to *them*! *Why* did Peter feel the need

to jump out and meet him on the way? Is this really a good time to jump ship? And what does he say? “Lord, *if* it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” It’s almost a bit of a dare, isn’t it? Like “Lord, if you’re really with me, I’m going to jump off this roof and expect to fly”. Is that how God works? We might also wonder, what are the rest of the 11 thinking, who stay in the boat? Maybe something like— “ Right, there goes Peter again; always has to prove he’s number one, the most holy, the best disciple, heads and shoulders above the rest of us, now he’s going to walk on water like Jesus.’ We don’t get detail about things like this, but when Jesus replies, “Come”, is he not so much thinking “you go, Peter,” as he is thinking—“ok, Peter, I know you think you’ve got to try this; leave everyone else in the boat and go solo, try and walk on water like me and see what happens”? We don’t actually know, do we? And notice that when Peter sinks and Jesus catches him, he doesn’t pull him up and say, “Keep on walking by yourself to that far shore, Peter, show us what you can do”. But rather, he pulls him into the safety of the boat! Peter is right back where he started—in the boat--and Jesus put him there! So, it’s at least plausible that another way to look at this text is to see the value of *staying in the boat* amidst the stormy seas—as in, don’t leave the church and think to go it alone in some dramatic way just as the waves are the most perilous.....maybe this is the exact time to stay together in the boat, trusting that it is afloat and that Christ comes to us where we already are? At a time like this, we are truly aware, I believe, of how much value there is in being a part of the church, part of our community of faith, together in the boat. Times are tough, but we’re all in the same boat, correct? The boat of the church is far from perfect, but it has endured and been blessed to be a blessing for thousands of years. There may be some wisdom in staying together, in the boat, as Jesus comes to us here. It’s at least worth considering that God is God, and we are not, and that

perhaps walking on water should be left to Christ? Maybe we need to keep manning the boat!

While the church is certainly struggling in our place and time, it is still God's vehicle for blessing the world, and we are a part of that. In fact, our particular boat in Knife River, MN is most definitely afloat and is a means that God uses to bring light and life to our community and world. By staying together in the boat, we are a part of what God is already up to in this time and place. And we can know that Christ is in the boat with us, and He has the power to still those stormy waves.

What a perfect Gospel text this is for us right now. Of course our boat seems small, the waves fearsome and hostile, the outcome of our journey uncertain. And sometimes we are, of course, afraid. There's a Scottish sailor's prayer that speaks to this desire we feel for the divine presence when surrounded by stormy seas: "Round our skiff be God's about-ness, ere she try the depths of sea. Seashell frail for all her stoutness, unless Thou her Helmsman be."

I think it's that God's *about-ness*, that presence of Christ, that we too long for and need and find in our own stormy seas. When we're overwhelmed and beset by perilous waves, we want Christ to be the Helmsman of our skiff. The good news of this text is this: even in stormy seas, the boat is afloat, we are in it together. Christ comes to us over even the most chaotic of seas and has the power to still the turbulent waves. In our times of fear, we hear his words: "Take heart! It is I; do not be afraid." Amen.

