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First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida  
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Matthew 14:22-33 (NRSV)

Immediately he made the disciples get into the 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."

#### SAILING WITH JESUS

The young mother examined the toy rather dubiously. Finally, she turned to the salesman and said, "Sir, don't you think this toy is a bit complicated for a little child?"

The clerk answered: "Madam, this is an educational toy. It is designed to help the child adjust to living in today's world. No matter how the child puts the toy together it is always wrong."

Do you ever feel like your life is like that educational toy, no matter what you do it is always wrong? I'm sure the disciples must have felt that way.

Sailing with Jesus was never easy. He was always saying something or doing something that made people very angry. And now, in obedience to what their Master told them to do, the disciples found themselves alone in the middle of a raging sea.

The language of this passage is very descriptive. In verse 24 we read that the wind was "contrary." No matter which way the disciples set their sails, and no matter how hard they rowed, it seemed like the wind was always against them. Matthew also tells us that the boat was being "battered" by the waves. The word literally means "tortured" or "torn apart."

Even though I usually keep my feet planted firmly on land, I think I understand the disciples' struggle. I bet you understand also. I bet everyone here remembers a time (or perhaps is going through a time) when the wind is contrary.

No matter how hard we try to go in a different direction it seems like there is always something blocking our way. The hour is late and our lifeboat is starting to come apart.

If that describes your situation, I have good news. Jesus is about to make an appearance. Jesus has a way of appearing when the wind is contrary and our lives are tortured.

That's how it happened long ago when the disciples were on the stormy sea. As they struggled against the wind and the waves, the disciples saw an amazing sight. They saw someone walking on the stormy sea.

## FEAR

Now, at first this ghost-like figure on the sea did not seem like a source of salvation. On the contrary, he seemed like a threat. In the ancient world, the deep waters were a symbol of chaos and evil. The sea was thought to be the abode of demonic forces hostile to God.

And so, even experienced sailors were frightened by this sight. Like so many of us, they thought, "Since the wind is against us and our boat is about to fall apart, apparently God has abandoned us too."

The Bible tells us, "They cried out for fear." Or as it is translated more graphically in Today's English Version of the Bible, "They screamed with fear." Can you picture the scene? The wind is howling, the waves are crashing, and above all this noise and confusion, we hear the screams of the disciples.

I am reminded that fear is at the heart of the biblical story. And fear is also at the heart of our story as well. In the face of storms and uncertainty, fear is our natural response.

Last summer I drove home early from my continuing education in North Carolina. Hurricane Francis was bearing down upon Central Florida, and I came home to protect my property. The lanes leaving Florida were jammed with cars going nowhere. I on the other hand was treated to my own private two lane road as I drove into Florida.

When I walked in the door, the television was playing. You could see the fear in their eyes as a weary governor and mayor conducted yet another news conference. The wind and the waves would soon be bearing down upon us again. "Stay calm," they said. But, none of us were calm. We were "hunkered down." We had learned to be afraid of the storm.

## FIGHT OR FLIGHT

This past week I spent some time in North Florida taking a course in conflict management. I was reminded that the root of conflict is a deep seated fear. Indeed, our brains are hard-wired to respond to perceived threats with what some have called the "fight or flight" response.

This was adaptive in a more primitive time, but quite often this not very helpful in many situations that we face in the modern world. Sometimes we find ourselves in a situation where we cannot run away or fight.

Take, for example, the acts of terrorism that were perpetuated on nine eleven. Many of us didn't know what to do with our feelings. There was no one to fight nor could we run away.

One person who witnessed the attacks in New York called a relative in Bedford, Iowa. The relative in Iowa had recently been to Wal-Mart and found that two items had been completely sold out as a result of the attacks, American flags and guns. The relative said,

"I don't know about you, Todd, but it seems to me that by the time the terrorists make it to Bedford, Iowa the war is pretty much over and we won't need those guns."

But, in a time of great fear, we do not think rationally. The primitive part of our brain takes over. We simply want to run away or fight.

## NON-ANXIOUS PRESENCE IN THE STORM

At that conference I attended this past week, we learned that one effective technique in a fearful and combative situation is to simply be a less anxious presence. Studies have been done that suggest that when people are letting the more primitive part of their brain take over, the presence of a less anxious person will help diffuse the situation.

I was reminded of the advice from Rudyard Kipling's poem, "If." One of life's real tests is the ability to keep our heads while everyone else is losing theirs and blaming it on us!

I can do that sometimes, especially when I'm not in that boat on the stormy lake. When you don't have a personal stake in a problem, it is much easier to be laid back. But, when I have a personal stake in the problem, when I'm in the boat, I'm not as good at keeping calm.

Even the bravest of sailors have been known to cry out in fear, and even the strongest people come to a point in their lives when all hope is abandoned.

Matthew wants us to know that at those times when we are torn apart by life, we can also be most expectant of our Lord's miraculous arrival. In fact, Matthew tells us that Jesus doesn't come until the "fourth watch."

That is the darkest watch of the morning. That's when Jesus is wonderfully present; the fourth watch of the darkest storm, when our boat is most tortured. Expect Jesus then!

Jesus came to the disciples on this dark storm tossed sea and said, "It is I. Don't be afraid."

#### DON'T BE AFRAID

Don't be afraid. Does that sound familiar? It should. The scriptures make this announcement over and over again. These are usually the first words out of angel's mouths. Abraham, Moses, Mary, Joseph, shepherds tending their flocks, Paul sitting in a jail cell, the women looking for Christ's body at Easter and disciples rowing a boat in the strong wind all hear these words.

In all, these words occur almost 100 times in the scriptures. It is the good news that we desperately need. We are fearful creatures, and there is much to fear in our world. But, there is an answer to our fears. When the wind and the waves threaten to overwhelm our little lifeboat, we sense a presence.

Jesus is among us. Jesus encourages us when the storm rages with the words, "It is I." Actually, in Greek the phrase is "ego eimi" which translated literally means, "I am."

In my opinion this phrase hearkens back to an earlier revelation of God when Moses heard God's voice at the burning bush. When Moses asked God's name, the Lord replied with the cryptic phrase, "I am."

The power displayed by Jesus as he walked on the water in the middle of the storm was none other than the power of God. From the very beginning of his gospel, Matthew has identified Jesus as Emmanuel -- God with us (1:23) -- and this story reinforces that role.

Paradoxically, the storms of life can be a means of blessing. When things are going badly, our hearts are more receptive to Jesus. A broken heart is often a door through which Christ can find entry.

I can personally say that some of the most spiritual moments of my life have often been some of the most difficult. I have learned through experience to expect His presence in the storms of life.

I believe with all my heart that He still comes to us in the midst of our troubles, saying, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

#### WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

But, Matthew's gospel tells us there is more than just hope in the midst of life's storms. There is also challenge. Peter cried out to this mysterious figure on the sea, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Matthew 14:28 (NRSV)

I think that's a strange thing for Peter to say. "Lord, if it's you, command me to come to you on the water." They were having a bad enough time staying afloat in their little boat; why in the world would Peter want to get out of the boat?

It's like saying, "Lord, if it's you, challenge me to risk my life on the raging sea. Challenge me to risk certain death on the swirling, chaotic waters."

And what did Jesus say? "Come on in the water's fine!"

And that's when Peter knew the truth. It was Jesus.

Jesus was forever challenging his disciples to do the impossible and jump into the raging waters. Remember last week's lesson? You have five loaves and two fish for 5,000 people? No problem. You give them something to eat.

Considering their extraordinary lack of understanding and faith, it was amazing how much Jesus asked his disciples to do. He sent them to preach and heal in his name, and He told them that one day they would even be required to take up a cross in his name.

So, it was no surprise to Peter that Jesus asked him to step out of the boat into the raging waters. It was par for the course.

Do you remember the words to that old gospel hymn? "Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling, calling for you and for me." Sometimes he does call us softly and tenderly. But, sometimes Jesus shouts at us amid the wind and the waves. He tells us,

"Get out of the boat. Throw caution to the wind.  
Leave everything and come follow me."

And impetuous Peter did what Jesus asked him to do. He got out of the boat. And Peter began walking on the water as he made his way toward Jesus. But, then Peter began to focus on the wind and the waves instead of Jesus, and at that moment, he began to sink.

There is always a struggle between faith and fear in our lives, especially when we are in dire straits.

#### LET GO AND LET GOD?

You may have heard the story about a man who got too close to the edge of the Grand Canyon. He lost his balance, and slipped over the edge. Just as he was about to fall a 1000 feet, he grabbed on to a root sticking out from the edge.

"Help me! Is there anyone up there?  
Help me! Save me!"

A voice answered,  
"I am the Lord. I can save you. Do you believe in me? Do you really want me to help you? "

"O, yes, Lord, I believe in you, more than you'll ever know.  
Please help me."

"OK," the Lord said. "I'll save you. Now, let go."

The poor man thought that he had misunderstood, "What did you say Lord?"

"Just let go of that root you're holding on to, and I'll save you. You have to trust me."

The man pauses a moment, and then shouted out,  
"Is there anyone else up there?!"

#### NO NEED FOR DOUBT

To his credit, Peter didn't ask if there was anyone else who could save him. Instead, he cried out, "Lord, save me." He turned his attention away from the wind and the waves and put himself in the hands of the one who could control the wind and the waves.

Jesus didn't hesitate to answer Peter's desperate cry. The Scripture tells us that immediately he stretched out his hand and caught him. But, as he pulled Peter up from the deep, Jesus also rebuked him mildly. He said, "You of little faith. Why did you doubt?"

I sympathize with Peter. When I begin to sink, I do not hesitate to cry out, "Lord, save me!"  
What else could I cry when the storm is all around me?

But, as I look back on the situation from a safe distance, I see that Jesus was right as well.  
There was no need to doubt. Our life, our whole life is in his hands.

Maybe that's why Matthew told this story, and maybe that's why we need to tell a similar story; maybe we need to remember a time in our life when Jesus saved us from the storm. It is a way of gaining courage for the living of these fearful days.

#### YOU HAVE TO DO SOMETHING

There was a retired man in California who had way too much time on his hands. One day he decided to tie helium filled balloons to his lawn chair. He thought it might be fun to take a brief ride.

After he tied a few balloons to his chair it started to lift off the ground. So he called his neighbors to hold the chair down. He tied on more, forty, fifty, sixty helium filled balloons. While the neighbors were still holding the chair the man strapped himself into the chair and told them, "Let go."

He expected to float up in the air about 10 feet. He had a sharp pointed stick to pop the balloons so that he would come gently back down. They let go and the chair soared up with the man strapped to the lawn chair. It continued to rise ... 30 feet, 40 feet, 50 feet and even higher it went. Soon it was above the house and trees and then it coasted silently out of sight.

About that time over at the Los Angeles Airport, the air traffic controller received a report. "This is Captain Jones, flight 411. I'd like to report that I've just passed a man in a lawn chair!"

Now the man eventually came down safely. Reporters asked, "Why did you do such a stupid thing?" He gave a great answer. He said, "You have to do something."

We have to do something. I don't recommend ballooning in a lawn chair, but we have to do something. We have to let go. We can't sit in the boat forever.

Contrary to what you might think, the safe place is not in the boat. The safe place is on the sea with Jesus. That's where Jesus can be found, and that's where life can be found.

CARLA

Carla was 28 years old when she died. It was January, 1993.

Carla didn't have to die. The doctors said, "Carla you have cancer but we think we can cure you with surgery and chemotherapy. But Carla there is one problem, you are pregnant. In order to treat you we must abort the child."

Carla said, "No. My child has a right to live."

Six months later Carla went into a coma. She was rushed to the hospital. The baby was delivered by cesarean section. The little boy was born three months premature and weighed less than two pounds. Eight hours later Carla died.

Little Stephano held on and grew stronger. He's twelve years old now.

Carla had a choice. She could have stayed in a safe, secure boat. It must have been so tempting. She saw the wind and the waves, the danger of the deep, the foreboding darkness. But with courage uncommon to human kind, she chose to step out and walk on the waves.

No doubt as the cancer progressed and the pain increased, Carla questioned and wondered and doubted. Perhaps for a moment she started to sink beneath the waves of the bottomless sea. But Jesus was there to take her by the hand and lift her up.

Little Stephano was born and so was Carla.  
The child was born to this life; the mother was born to the eternal life.

Many of us seem content to splash around by the seashore. But, Jesus bids us go out into deeper and more dangerous waters. It is an opportunity to deepen and test our faith.

If you want to get close to Jesus, remember this: he is the one who walks on the stormy waters. He is the one who saves with body broken and blood shed.

It costs everything to walk with Jesus on the water.  
But, it is the walk of life eternal.

Amen.

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN**