

Salvation Through the Storm

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Matthew 14:22-33

22 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."

IMAGES OF THE CHURCH

What is your image of the church? When I was a child I thought the church was the place where God lived ... literally.

We didn't remove our sandals as did Moses before the burning bush, but we did dress up in our Sunday best as a sign of our respect. I remember wishing that respect for God didn't have to include a freshly starched white shirt and a tie that always seemed too tight around my collar.

We would start all of our worship services with the same song, "God himself is with us." And many church buildings were designed to reflect this sense of this sense of the holy and the majestic. The highest points in town are often church steeples. Churches are often massive buildings supported by stout columns. The church architect had a message for us, "God himself is with us."

But, in some churches the people inside do not seem to reflect the majesty of the architecture. Numbers are dwindling. People are discouraged. We may still say that God is with us, but instead of the divine presence we often find pettiness and power struggles.

Some are worried that the church will not weather the storm and one day soon will disappear altogether.

I think we need a new image, a new vision of what the church is called to be. Even though we try to suggest by our church architecture that the church is a stable place where God resides, maybe we've got the wrong idea.

Maybe we're just fooling ourselves into when we think that our church towers reach toward heaven.

Do you remember the story of the Tower of Babel?

Human beings decided to build their very own stairway to heaven. But, it didn't work out.

That building project ended with confusion, division, and disillusionment. The Bible tells us that human beings would not find God in even the most ambitious of building projects.

But, of course we kept trying.

Remember when Jesus' disciples were admiring the great beauty of Herod's Temple? Jesus told his disciples that this beautiful building would be completely destroyed.

That was a shocking statement to the disciples. The destruction of the Temple would mean that God had abandoned His people.

Years after the failed Tower of Babel, men and women were still trying to contain the presence of God in a building.

And we're still trying to do it. We think of the church as a grand institution projecting power and might.

God is with us, but I think we have the wrong image when it comes to the church. I think the early Christians had a better idea of what it meant to be the church.

After the death and resurrection of Jesus the church came into being by the power of the Spirit. But, this new faith community was not characterized by power and might.

The early church did not build huge buildings with massive columns and spires that reached toward heaven. Instead, this new community of faith shared their possessions. They helped each other out. They ate together. They worshiped together.

That early church grew like wildfire.

And do you know what image these early Christians used to symbolize the church?

It was the image of disciples in a small boat on a storm tossed sea. I wonder if this might be a good image for us to use as well.

In the church we're not building a tower that will reach to heaven.

We are sailing through troubled waters in the middle of the night. We are in a small lifeboat that is about to be capsized. We (all of us) are holding on for dear life.

And what do you want more than anything else on that storm tossed boat? You want salvation. You want to be rescued from the wind and the waves.

That's my image of the church.

We're all in the same boat, and things don't look so good for us. The wind and waves are against us, and the threat of destruction is real.

ALONE IN THE STORM

Why did Jesus send those first disciples into the storm alone?

He did it on purpose you know. The Scripture is clear on this point. In Matthew 14:22 we read, "Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds."

He "made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side."

It's obvious that Jesus sent the disciples ahead of him for a purpose. What was that purpose?

Maybe some faith lessons can only be learned on the storm tossed sea.

The disciples struggled all night to get to the other shore. But, they couldn't make it. The forces arrayed against them were too strong.

Maybe Jesus wanted the disciples to experience the frustration of the wind and the waves. Maybe Jesus wanted to put his disciples in a situation where they could not save themselves.

He wanted to show them that they were not the masters of the sea. He wanted to show them that there are some winds and there are some waves that are too strong for even the most experienced sailor.

So, the wind and the waves and the frustration set the stage for faith.

Isn't that how it is with us?

We might talk about faith, but when we are stopped cold in our tracks by circumstances that we cannot control, faith is no longer a theoretical matter. It is a practical matter.

The disciples thought that they were alone that night on that storm tossed sea. Jesus stayed behind to dismiss the crowd and then (as was his custom) he retreated to the mountain to pray.

In an earlier account, Matthew told us of another time when the disciples encountered the storm. In this first storm story, Jesus was with them. He was asleep, and the disciples had to wake Jesus up to save them. (Matthew 8:23-27)

At least in this first encounter Jesus was with them, and he was miraculously able to still the wind and the waves. The disciples wondered what kind of man could command the wind and the waves.

But, in this storm story the disciples are not so lucky.

Jesus is away. The storm has lasted all night, and they are losing hope. The wind and the waves are against them. They are far from shore, and their little lifeboat is about to be torn apart by the elements.

TERRIFIED BY JESUS

It's at this point that a figure comes toward them, walking on the water. And the disciples are afraid; not of the wind and the waves but of this ghost walking on the water in the middle of the storm.

You would think that the disciples would be overjoyed to see Jesus. You would think that the disciples would have said, "Jesus is here. We're saved."

But, that's not how the story goes. They said he was a ghost, and they were terrified.

The presence of Jesus does not always bring comfort and joy, even for his closest disciples. The presence of Jesus is sometimes overwhelming. He is after all the incarnation of the Holy One, the Word made flesh.

Nowhere is this more apparent than when Jesus walks on the water in the middle of the storm. The disciples do not recognize Jesus. His presence multiplies their fears instead of taking them away.

Have you ever been scared out of your wits? Has fear ever taken over your life?

Most of us have experienced this kind of fear from an early age.

A child was sent to retrieve the mail after dark. The driveway made its way through the woods and out toward the highway.

There was very little light that night. Every shadow seemed to threaten destruction.

The little boy hated that trip, especially at night. You never knew what could come out of those dark woods. If you were attacked, there would be no one to help you.

And on this night his fears seemed to come true. As he made his way to the mailbox he heard footsteps, footsteps coming toward him!

What could he do? It was too far to run. His heart beat faster, and he was frozen in place by fear.

It was like one of those dreams when the monster approached and you couldn't run and you couldn't scream. Am I the only one who has had that dream?

And about that time there came a familiar voice from the darkness.

"It's Uncle Jeff. Don't be afraid. It is I." Just a voice and the words "it is I" and I was saved.

Those were the words that Jesus spoke to the disciples, "Take heart. It is I. Don't be afraid." But, even those words were not enough to dispel the fears of the disciples. They were still not sure that this was Jesus instead of a phantom from the deep.

THE TEST

So, Peter proposes a test. He says, "Lord, if its you, command me to come to you on the water."

That's a fascinating statement. Peter is not sure that this is Jesus so how does Peter put him to the test? He says, "Lord, if its you command me to come to you on the water."

Peter might not be able to recognize this master of the wind and the waves, but Peter does know the human Jesus that he has been following for the past few months. And Peter knows what that Jesus would have him do.

He would have him follow him, even if it meant doing something outrageous like getting out of the boat in the middle of the storm. Jesus passes Peter's test. Jesus responds to Peter by saying, "Come."

And Peter gets out of the storm tossed boat and actually walks on water as he makes his way to Jesus.

But, then impulsive Peter takes his eyes off Jesus. He begins to "notice" the hurricane force winds. Maybe this walking on water stuff wasn't such a great idea after all.

Peter begins to sink. And Peter cries out, "Lord, save me."

Jesus saves Peter (and he mildly chides him for his lack of faith). And then Jesus gets in the boat with the other disciples, and the wind stops.

A DIVINE REVELATION

The psalmist in praising the Lord wrote, “You rule over the surging sea; when its waves mount up, you still them.” (Psalm 89:9) This story is about more than a fantastic miracle. It is a theophany. It is a fulfillment of the promises of Scripture.

It is a revelation of the Divine in Jesus. Jesus does what only God can do.

The disciples understood this. They worship Jesus. And they say, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

What is the meaning of this story for us?

I would suggest that we in the church are like a frail, wind tossed ship. And sometimes we are so filled with fear that we do not know where to turn for help.

So, Jesus comes to us. Jesus saves us. Jesus lifts us up out of the deep. Jesus reveals to us the love of the Creator, the Lord of heaven and earth.

Notice in our story for today that Jesus didn’t encourage his disciples from the safety of land. He doesn’t shout, “Hey, you guys need to row harder. Put your back into it!”

No, Jesus comes to them in the middle of the wind and the waves and he says, “Take courage. It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

According to one commentator this statement is an echo of the divine name. In other words, this is another instance of Jesus claiming to be the great I AM. Jesus is not just another miracle worker who can control the wind and the waves. He is the Lord. He is the Creator.

Jesus walking on the water is supposed to be a vision of the impossible. That’s the whole point of this passage.

Some commentators who have a bias against the miraculous have tried to downplay the miraculous aspect of this story.

Some have suggested that Jesus was really on the shore but from the disciple’s perspective it appeared that he was walking on water. Others have said that Jesus carefully picked his way along a rock ledge, which led out to the storm tossed boat.

No one can walk on water they say.
And of course that's precisely the point. This is a story that reveals the identity of Jesus.

In the Hebrew Scriptures only God is portrayed as the only one who can walk on water. For example in Job 9:8 we read this about the Creator, "He alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea." In Jesus we see the human face of God.

GOD IS WITH US

The hymn had it right. "God himself is with us." God is with us in those places where we feel safe, but God is also with us when the wind blows and the waves threaten to loosen our fragile hold on life.

The Creator comes to us when we are sinking, reaches out to us and lifts us up. The proper response to that salvation is worship. And, of course, that's why we're here today.

I'm not sure what storm is raging in your life, but this I do know. There is a storm raging. There is a circumstance in your life that threatens you and the ones you love. And sometimes the fear is so great that you feel like you are stuck in the middle. It seems like the wind is always against you.

I have some good news for you.
God is on the way. Jesus comes to us this very day.

He is still the master of the wind and the waves. He gives us a peace that passes all understanding. He reaches out his hand and saves us.

In Matthew's Gospel, this story is meant to reveal who Jesus is. But that revelation is only possible in the midst of the chaos. If Jesus had not forced the disciples to embark on this uncertain journey, they would have missed the opportunity to see God revealed in their midst.

In the middle of our chaotic lives maybe we have a unique opportunity to see God in our midst. Maybe the storm will help us see what we could not see before.

In Jesus God is with us.

Amen.