

Power and Presence on Stormy Seas

Matthew 14:22-33

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22 Immediately Jesus 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."

Matthew 14:22-33 NRSV

A biblical story about a storm at sea with wind and waves that threaten life seemed a little too close to home when we living in New Jersey post Superstorm Sandy. This past week the scenes of destruction from the recent hurricane and storms up the eastern seaboard brought back many memories. We don't need a gospel writer to tell us that the disciples were afraid in their boat as the wind blew and waves crashed on the Sea of Galilee.

Jesus arrives into this morning's Scripture – fully human and fully hurting. In the verses that precede this story in Matthew, John the Baptist has just been executed. Herod has thrown a party, and as part of the entertainment at his feast, King Herod and his court have beheaded John the Baptist. When word reaches Jesus, he tries to escape to a deserted place – maybe he is grieving, maybe he's exhausted. The Empire has won the day, yet again.

Jesus heads out to be alone, to be in a place to pray, to find solace ... and the crowds follow him. He can't get a break. Jesus continues offer the crowd compassion. Jesus heals their sick – (the Greek is closer to "Jesus heals their weak.") The most vulnerable in their midst are made whole. One after another. Throughout the day.

And as the day starts to draw to a close, Jesus' disciples come to him, and suggest that it's time to send the crowd away – let's call it a day, Jesus, it's late, we've/you've worked hard, send

them back to the villages to get something to eat. And Jesus' response: compassion. Jesus doesn't send the crowd away. Matthew tells the story of the feeding of the 5000. A miracle. Human and divine love woven to feed bodies and souls.

Then immediately Jesus orders the disciples to get into a boat and travel to the other side. Away from the crowds who may be getting riled up. He didn't join them for the journey, but instead went off by himself to pray. Going to try again. Centering prayer, solitude.

23 And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone,

Prayer is central to his mission. The location on a mountain signals that this is an important moment for Jesus. He tried to find solitude earlier, but the crowds interrupted him (14:13). Now he finds the opportunity to pray. Matthew tells us that he is "by himself" and "alone"—emphasizing the solitary nature of his prayer. It is only here and garden of Gethsemane (26:36) that Matthew reports Jesus is alone in prayer.

The story continues. *24 by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them.*

The sea in the Bible connotes the forces of chaos, held at bay in the creative acts of God, but always threatening. Being on the sea is itself a threat, representing all the anxieties and powers that threaten the goodness of the created order. To be at sea evokes images of death, the active power that threatens the goodness of life.

After getting out to sea they are far from land, probably 3 miles from shore. The wind was against them, so they were making little headway. Some of them probably wanted to turn around, but others protested that they were halfway to the other side. It was the wee hours of the morning, and they had struggled all night to keep the boat afloat. Imagine how exhausted they must have been. The fishermen among them would have known dangers.

Do we feel like that sometimes? Tossed by storms around us? As individuals, family, community? What was it like to be a small boat in the storm? We are in the same storm these days but not all in the same boat. Some boats are sinking in the storm of this pandemic and economic catastrophe and racial injustices.

The boat, along with the anchor and fish, is one of the oldest Christian symbols. A boat was an ancient symbol of the Christian Church. Times when the Church tossed on the sea of struggle and persecution. Part of the imagery comes from the story of the ark saving Noah's family during the Flood. And from this story - Jesus protecting the Peter's boat and the apostles on the stormy Sea of Galilee.

The church as a ship or boat continued as a symbol during Reformation. The ceiling in the chapel at Stirling Castle in Scotland is in the shape of a hull of a ship. In European church architecture, sitting in sanctuary seated in what would be called the *nave*, the word from which we get the word *navy*. The very first church architects were shipbuilders. They built the church as if they were building an inverted ship. The ceiling was like the hull, and the rafters would be cross beams. The church is like a ship. You are here as a member of the crew. Every person here is a crewmember with a responsibility. Christ is like the captain. Need each other in the storms of life.

The story becomes more dramatic. *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."*

He was telling them not to fear, because "It is I." The Greek that is translated "It is I," is *ego eimi*. A literal translation is simply "I am." Echoes what Moses heard from the burning bush in Exodus 3. He asked God's name. God said "I AM WHO I AM." Here Jesus is telling the disciples that he is the presence of God with them in the midst of their storm. He has come to be with them.

Take heart – in Greek connected to courage. (Θαρσεῖτε: thar-seh'-ta) be of good courage! take courage! take heart! feel confidence!

Peter, suddenly bold, said, "*Master, if it's really you, call me to come to you on the water.*" He said, "*Come ahead.*" But when he looked down at the waves churning beneath his feet, he lost his nerve and started to sink. He cried, "*Lord, save me!*" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "*You of little faith, why did you doubt?*"

"Doubt" here doesn't refer to unbelieving, but uncertainty. It could also be translated as "wavered." Wavering can be an act of deep faith. When we waver, and admit our own uncertainty, we show humility and vulnerability. In our humility, we learn to be open to the Holy One., not our own certainty. We learn to go deeper and broader.

32 When they got up into the boat, the wind ceased. Christ offers calm, peace, presence.

Some us relate to Peter. He often acts before he thinks and is honest with his questions and struggles. Is it you, teacher? Is Peter's faith and trust faltering, wavering? Maybe. Probably. That is a life long journey. It's ongoing, not once and for all, for most of us. Wavering may happen when you lost a loved one, lost your health, lost a job, or lost a dream, and you wondered where God was, how God could let it happen, or what's even the point of a God who doesn't fix everything or protect us. Like a pandemic. Like tsunami of job loss and businesses closing.

I believe the church is a community where we wrestle with these questions. The church can be a source of hope in the storm because we are grounded in the love that deep and eternal and will ground us in the midst of storms, inner and outer. Right now we are in the midst of looking at our boat and wondering what supplies we are going to need in this storm because it looks like we are going to be out here a while. How are we being called?

Sometimes we feel afraid because there are realities that shake us, worry us. This story offers words of courage and prayer and calming the waters, solitude and community. Do not be stuck in fear. Christ is with you and in you. Imagine the Holy One walks on miles of choppy water just to be with you and us in the boat.

Author Brene Brown went through a time of storms and wind. She describes a time when she really thought she needed to and had control over everything....Then she hit what she calls a "midlife unraveling." All the books said go back to church, so she did, but she says she went back for the wrong reasons. She says, "I went back to church thinking that it would be like an epidural, that it would take the pain away."

But once she was back at church, she was confronted with challenging and unpredictable things. Things like forgiveness. The pastor of her church said that in order for forgiveness to really happen, something has to die. Maybe it's just your expectations of a person, or maybe it's a bit of your own ego, but there has to be a death for forgiveness to happen. This, says Brown, was both hard, and hopeful.

Brown says she'd always believed that God is love, She says, "People would want love to be like unicorns and rainbows, and so you send Jesus, and people are like, 'Oh my God; love is hard. Love is sacrifice. Love is eating with the sick. Love is trouble. Love is rebellious.'" And so, she says, church was not like an epidural. "It was like a midwife," she says, "who just stood next to me saying, 'push.' It's supposed to hurt a little bit." "And I got it," Brown says. "Love is not easy. Love is not hearts and bows. ... I thought faith would say, 'I'll take away the pain and discomfort. But what it ended up saying is 'I'll sit with you in it.' And I never thought, until I found it, that that would be enough. But it's perfect." (1)

Our Wednesday book study is discussing a book by John Phillip Newell. It is challenging us to think about rebirthing the church. Church as midwife in the midst of the storm.

Jesus reached out his hand to Peter and caught him and then sat with him. Jesus got in the battered boat with the exhausted and battered disciples and the wind ceased. Calm, peace, presence. I'll sit with you. We are finding ways to sit together but not too close. Sit together on the phone or Zoom or on a driveway. We will sit with and love our neighbors as Bob preached about last week because there are storms we are facing and we are not all in the same boat.

I imagine many of us feel alone and in the dark right now, maybe out in the boat at night. Winds blowing. The pandemic has lasted longer than we could have guessed. We know what's behind us; we can't see what's ahead. Maybe we cannot quite see the shore.

Close with another blessing and invitation from Jan Richardson. Nancy read one of her blessings. Jan is a Methodist pastor and has known great loss in her life. Here is her invitation that comes out of this biblical story and her own faith journey.

*Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him.
What are you knowing about faith right now? Where is it bearing you?*

*May we risk
the drenching
by which we
are drawn
toward the voice
that calls us,
the love
that catches us,
and the faith
that carries us
beyond the wind,
the wave.
Amen. (2)*

- 1) Brene Brown, "Brené Brown on Church as Midwife," posted April 11, 2014, on David Lose, "In the Meantime" <http://www.davidlose.net/2014/04/brene-brown-on-church-as-midwife/>
- 2) Jan Richardson, "Walk Across That Water," posted on August 5, 2014 on Painted Prayerbook <https://paintedprayerbook.com/2014/08/05/walk-across-that-water/>