

Aug 25 Walking with Jesus In the Storms

Matthew 14:22-34

Today we encounter one of the most dramatic moments in Peter's life as a disciple of Jesus. Mark and John tell the story of the storm at sea but only Matthew tells about Peter walking on the water. We need to put this story into the timeline of Jesus' ministry. Word came to Jesus that John the Baptist had been beheaded by Herod. This caused Jesus to try and withdraw, at least for a time, from public ministry. He needed to think about the implications of what Herod had done and how it might affect him and his ministry. So, he decided to go with the disciples to a deserted spot a bit of the way down the lake. The Sea of Galilee even to this day is not heavily populated and so finding a deserted place would not be difficult. The people seeing the direction the boat is headed take off on foot to meet him. He teaches them and then, late in the day, feeds the more than 5,000 who had gathered there. He then sends the disciples ahead of him while he dismisses the people.

The disciples, I believe, thought that Jesus planned to walk back towards Capernaum with the people. They set out in their boat when a storm blows in. Because the Sea of Galilee is so low and surrounded by mountains it is not unusual for winds off the desert to turn the calm sea into a frothing mess. It blew the boat far out into the lake. They battled the storm all night when, just at dawn, Jesus comes to them walking on the water. The disciples response was fear. They began to scream it is a ghost!

Jesus, in walking on the water, did only what God can do. Part of the good news of this story is that Jesus continues to come to us in the storms of life. So when the waves of life are battering your little boat know that you are not alone. Jesus is with you. We also need to hear the words Jesus spoke to the disciples. "Do not be afraid."

Those three little words, "Don't be afraid" are the most frequently spoken words from God to human beings in scripture. We will find that phrase more than 140 times in the Bible. Why do we need reassurance not to be afraid? There could be many reasons for that but I think it boils down to the fact that the storms that assail us seem so big, so powerful that it causes us to fear that God is not with us or is not powerful enough to

make a difference. We need the reassurance that our fears are not grounded in reality. God is with us and that makes all of the difference in the world.

So the next time you are caught in a stormy time of life and are filled with fear remember Jesus words. "Do not be afraid," Listen for those words for God is always speaking them to us. Yes, the stormy winds might be blowing so hard that it is difficult to hear them or believe them. Yet, if the Bible tells us anything, it is that we are to trust and not be afraid. This does not mean that the current storm will end the way we might like but it does mean that we are not going through it alone.

Now we get to Peter's part in the story. He says, "Lord, if it's you, order me to come to you on the water." Peter didn't just call to Jesus and step out of the boat. He waited for Jesus to bid him to step out of the boat and come to him. He did not trust in his own ability to walk on the water. He trusted that if Jesus called him to do it, he could.

Peter had been working on the water for his entire adult life. His experience had taught him that getting out of a boat on the lake meant that a person either would have to sink or swim; walking was not an option. And in a storm like that, and being far from shore, swimming wasn't much of an option either. Yet here was Simon Peter stepping out of the boat. It shows what tremendous faith he had in Jesus.

It makes me ask, "How much faith do I have in Jesus?" How much of my life is dictated by fear instead of trusting in God? Think for a moment how you might finish the sentence, "Lord, if it is you....?" Are you willing to ask that question because to do so means opening yourself to stepping away from security. What adventures are awaiting you if only you would trust Jesus? It is a scary but exciting thought. Is there a place Jesus is saying to you right now, "Come?"

To ask and respond would mean stepping out of the boat. Do I have that much faith? Too often I am one of the eleven huddled in the boat afraid of the storm. In this account I am reminded that when we are motivated primarily by faith rather than fear we recognize that the adventure is outside the boat. Is there a place right now you think Jesus is encouraging you to move forward trusting him?

I think of people who have asked such risky questions and found the adventure is outside the shell of fear in which they have huddled. Let me give you one quick example. I am reminded of a woman who was forced to move because of health. It was a stormy time. She finally said, "Lord, you know I don't want to do this but I trust you are with me and will give me something new to do." That is close to Peter's words. She was willing to step out in faith trusting God would chart a new path for her. And to her surprise, because of that openness to what God might offer, she found many new friends and some new adventures.

The invitation to Peter would have been for any of the disciples. It would have been scary for Peter to step out of the boat, into the storm but he did it. He walked on the water. He went places he never imagined possible because he had faith in Jesus.

Then, Peter noticing how high the waves are begins to sink. Why do you think this happened? Was Peter feeling frightened, had doubts or something else? I believe it was because he took his focus off Jesus and let his surrounding influence him. Jesus reaches out his hand and helps Peter into the boat. It also says that the winds calm down. After rescuing him, Jesus said to Peter, "You man of weak faith! Why did you begin to have doubts? The Gospel doesn't tell us anything about Jesus' tone of voice or inflection. But I don't think he was really chastising Peter. After all, Peter showed more faith than the eleven who remained in the boat. I imagine Jesus meaning something like "Peter, why did you look away? I had you. You didn't need to worry! If you only trusted me."

This is a reminder to us as well. Peter began to sink when he lost focus. When he paid more attention to the storm than to Jesus. When we focus on the storms of life instead of on Jesus who is walking beside us we too begin to sink. We too might need to hear, "You don't need to worry you just need to trust me."

Are there places in your life right now where are you looking away from Jesus? Are you feeling as if you are sinking? Ask yourself what are you focused on. Is your focus on Jesus, trusting that with him you will ride out the storm and perhaps walk on water? Or, are you focused on the storm? You are noticing the waves and realizing that you are in a place you don't want to be. All of a sudden the boat, even though it is

battered by waves, seems a more secure place than standing out here on the water. When we are feeling vulnerable, when we are feeling scared, we begin to sink and be overwhelmed. We are reminded to focus on Jesus and trust.

I think of people I have known who are making the final journey of their lives. Some only focus on their surroundings, their pain, their limitations, their fears and they are sinking. Others focus on their faith and even though they have the same physical problems they have a peace and even at times joy. They focus on the blessings and have a peace that no storm can take away.

During storms in our lives, when the waves are crashing up against our boat and we fear we won't survive, Jesus still walks on the water to wherever we are. He encourages us to trust. He is there to help us when we falter and always Jesus gets in the boat with us. Jesus may not make the storm go away, as he did for Peter and the disciples. But Jesus is riding it out with us and somehow that makes the storm less terrifying. That is part of what the Christian's spiritual life is about. Feeling Jesus' presence with us enables us to be calmed, even if the storm is raging all around us.

And, we are also reminded that sometimes the adventure is outside the boat. If we can let go of the fear we might be feeling and hear Jesus words, "Come" and step out into the unknown we too may walk where we never thought possible trusting in the one who bids us risk.