

“Stormy Weather”
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Overbrook Presbyterian Church
19th Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 13, 2017

First Scripture Reading: Psalm 46

¹God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. ²Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; ³though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. Selah

⁴There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. ⁵God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns. ⁶The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. ⁷The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah

⁸Come, behold the works of the Lord; see what desolations he has brought on the earth. ⁹He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire. ¹⁰“Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth.” ¹¹The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah

Second Scripture Reading: Matthew 14:22-33

²²Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. ²⁷But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” ²⁸Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” ²⁹He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” ³¹Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” ³²When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”



Sermon: *“Stormy Weather”*

This passage is the stuff of great Sunday school lessons and Vacation Bible school stories. Everything comes into play here: faith, doubt, fear, Jesus’ power over the natural elements, Peter being impetuous, salvation, mercy, and grace. But, when people talk about this story they invariably criticize the disciples who do not recognize Jesus and Peter for sinking into the water as he tries to walk toward Jesus; Oh they of little faith. If only they had trusted more.

It is worth pointing out though, that just three chapters after this story, Jesus will tell these same disciples that “if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.”¹

The mustard seed is one of the smallest seeds of which Jesus and the people of His time were aware. So just a small, tiny bit of faith should enable you to do amazing things. So how much faith did it take for Peter to step out of that boat, in the dark, amidst the whitecaps and the wailing winds? And yet, if we believe popular opinion, that much faith apparently still wasn’t enough.

But how much faith did it take for the disciples to obey Jesus and get in the boat in the first place? How much faith to give up their lives and follow him? How much faith does Peter actually have to try walking out on the water to meet Jesus? All these things are testaments to the disciples’ faith.

So, the problem that the disciples’ experience is *not* a lack of faith, it has to be something else. I would argue that it’s fear. Or more to the point, that the things they fear, distract them from Jesus.

When things get crazy and scary, they get frightened. When the situation moves from the normal and the mundane to the extraordinary; when it moves beyond their expectations, beyond that for which they are prepared, they do not maintain their composure as exemplary images of discipleship perfection; But who, save Jesus, could? If you put yourself in their situation, their reactions make sense.

Why didn’t the disciples recognize Jesus walking across the water? Because almost no rational person would have. When you’re on a boat at sea and you see something approaching on the water, the rational mind automatically thinks “boat,” or “flock of birds” but not “person.” Add to that the fact that for generations, sailing lore has brought us stories of mermaids and Krakens and St. Elmo’s fire and the Lost Dutchman and mysterious lights on the horizon. Weird things happen at sea. Strange things that can’t be explained have always been the fodder for old seafarer’s tales.

So, when these men, most of whom were fisherman who made their living on the sea of Galilee, are once again in their boat in a storm at night and they see something strange, of course they think it’s a ghost. But then what rational person, seeing something strange at sea, at night, would simply shrug and say “Oh, must be Jesus”?

How many times have you been startled in your own house by a family member you knew was there? You’re sitting on the couch, reading the newspaper, when you look up and there’s your wife or husband or kid standing in the doorway and you jump out of your skin. Not because you saw a stranger, but because you saw someone you weren’t expecting. *Of course*, the disciples would be afraid to see someone coming to them across the water. Who would expect *that?!?*

And I always feel for Peter in this story when Jesus says to him “Why did you doubt?”. And I always want to answer for him. Because God gave me eyes to see and a mind to consider and an instinct to avoid danger, God gave me the good sense to know that humans can’t breathe under water much less walk on top of it. Because for generations doubt and skepticism and being careful kept my ancestors alive.

Why did Peter doubt? Because he had every reason too. Being out in the middle of a lake in a boat at night when the wind is up and the water is choppy is frightening. How much more so when you’re *outside* of

¹ Matthew 17:20, NRSV

the boat? No, the problem isn't that Peter was lacking in faith, it's that when the situation in which he found himself grew more dangerous and frightening, he let it distract him.

Peter sees the waves and hears the wind and loses sight of Jesus standing right in front of him. He thinks "I can't do this!" and forgets to trust that Jesus can.

You see, there's a difference between trusting God when life is calm and trusting God when it's not. Ask any athlete and they'll tell you, making a free throw, sinking a three-foot putt, completing a ten-yard pass, is easy. But attempt that free-throw with no time on the clock and the game on the line, and try to sink that putt with hundreds of people watching, and stand in the pocket and throw that pass with a thousand pounds of defensive linemen bearing down on you, and it gets a little more difficult.

But here's the real power of this story: regardless of whether the disciples recognize Jesus or not, He still comes to them. Regardless of whether Peter is faithful, Jesus invites him out of the boat. Regardless of whether Peter remains confident in the face of wind and wave, Jesus reaches out to save him. Jesus' actions toward the disciples are not predicated on them being worthy. Jesus does not act to save them because they are so awesome. Jesus acts in spite of the fact that they are not.

But secondly, the author of the story tells us that after Jesus rescues Peter, He takes him back to the boat and then *after* they are safely back inside, He stills the storm. It's a small detail but an important one. Jesus saves Peter *in the midst of* the storm. But Jesus doesn't *prevent* the storm.

That's an important distinction to make since we often find ourselves in stormy situations. And I think the narrative of the church is sometimes that if you have Christ in your heart, life is easy; that we shouldn't be concerned or worried if we have faith. Yet more often than we would like we are confronted with fearful, worrisome things.

Every time I read about the saber-rattling that Kim Jong-Un and Donald Trump are doing, I worry about the soldiers, every one of them someone's son or daughter, and the innocent people that live on the Korean Peninsula who will pay the highest price if their military gamesmanship turns into actual war.

And this weekend, a group of White Supremacists rallied in Charlottesville, Virginia. Why? I guess to protest that their brand of evil isn't socially acceptable anymore. Apparently white people are having it rough these days. I'm not sure what was more offensive, their hate-filled speech that denigrated Jews, people of color and Muslims, or the fact that they claim themselves to be somehow Christian.

That human beings can hold this kind of animosity towards their brothers and sisters is repugnant. That they are willing to act violently against those who disagree with their distorted view of the world is frightening.

There is plenty to strike fear into the hearts of mortals that doesn't make the news. We worry for our children when we send them away to places where we cannot protect them. We put our livelihoods and those of our families in the hands of employers, trusting that the paychecks will keep coming. We worry about health, paying the mortgage, our loved ones.

I used to think that most people live their lives without any real hardships. As a pastor, I learned it is just the opposite. Most of us struggle with something. It is the rare person who lives a life trouble-free. And like the wind and waves, most of the things we fear most are beyond our control.

In a world filled with fearsome things, we would be crazy *not* to be at least a little afraid. But there is a difference between being afraid and failing to trust. Remember, Peter walked out to Jesus at Jesus' invitation. But Jesus invited Peter because Peter *asked* Him too. *It was Peter's idea!* And Peter was no mere spiritual thrill-seeker. He trusted Jesus. He knew that Jesus would hold him up. Yet when he got out in the middle of everything, he got scared. Which was, again, perfectly natural. But he allowed his fear to distract him from his trust in Jesus. And he sank.

Peter's distraction always reminds me of a line I read once: "The sheep in the shepherd's arms looks only into the eyes of the shepherd, not to wolves around it, seeking to do it harm."

God does not preserve us from stormy weather. When the dark clouds gather, that is the time when our faith is challenged the most and that is the time when we have to lean on God the most, too. It's okay to be afraid. It's natural. But we can't be distracted by the wind and the waves.

When we are most worried, those are the times to set our eyes on Jesus and focus on who He is and what He teaches us: When we are most afraid, that's when it's most important to remember to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.² Those are the times when we remember Jesus saying "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to Me."³ These are the times we remember Jesus saying, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."⁴

When we are most afraid, those are the times to remember the words of Paul that nothing in life or in death "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."⁵

Because we believe, we know that God wins in the end; that God's purposes are being worked out. That because of God's great love for humanity, even on the darkest days, God is at work building the Kingdom; bringing something good from the evil that human beings perpetrate.

And so we put our trust in God. And we follow Jesus each day. But that doesn't mean we won't experience storms. It just means that we face the wind and waves knowing that behind the clouds, the sun still shines.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

² Matthew 5:44, NRSV

³ Matthew 25:40, NRSV

⁴ John 13:34, NRSV

⁵ Romans 8:38, NRSV