

Summer Shorts: Brave

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Matthew 14:22-33

Immediately He made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while He dismissed the crowds. And after He had dismissed the crowds, He went up the mountain by Himself to pray. When evening came, He was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning He came walking towards them on the lake. But when the disciples saw Him walking on the lake, they were terrified, saying, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.'

Peter answered him, 'Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water.' He said, 'Come.' So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came towards Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!' Jesus immediately reached out His hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?' When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshipped Him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'

Faith and Doubt. Words we know only all too well in the church. Books, sermons, hymns, songs, prayers, SS lessons, newsletter articles ... just about anything you can think of has been written and discussed about these topics that seem to hover at the center of our faith. Somehow, we have come to believe that you either have faith or doubt... but it is far more likely that they come as a pair. Today's passage shows us it is far more likely that we embody both at the very same time!

It is the end of a long day of Jesus preaching and teaching. The disciples – aided by Jesus – have just fed the 5,000+ and they are tired. Jesus sends them off in a boat across the lake and tells them He will meet them there after dismissing the crowds and a taking a bit of time for Himself. Evening comes, and the disciples find themselves in the middle of the lake when a storm erupts.

Storms were not unusual on the Sea of Galilee and would erupt quite suddenly creating large waves that would have been a real threat to a small fishing boat especially in the dark of the night. It must have been quite a sight to wake up in the middle of a storm with waves crashing against and tossing the small boat around, in a small boat on the sea and then to see a figure coming at you across the water. It would have been terrifying for any of us...and yet in the midst of it all of that chaos the figure turns out to be Jesus Christ, their friend, their comforter, their teacher, their savior.

In the midst of this storm, in the dark of the early morning, as the boat of the 12 disciples is being battered and beaten by waves and wind, it is Jesus who walks out across the water to be with them. He walks to them. And when their fear of who He was arises, He calms them with His voice reminding them it is their friend – their Savior – their Lord. Jesus comes to them in their vulnerable and fearful state. He is present with them in the storm. And then at Peter's request, Jesus calls him out into the water...

Now it is scary to step out into a storm. Who among us check the weather and build our day around the thunderstorms? Who among us has found themselves moving to the checkout line at the store only to hear the crash of thunder and deluge of rain and then decided maybe there were a few more things you needed to check-out while you waited for that storm to pass on by.

But Peter asks Jesus to call to him. In a moment of total faith, Peter asks Jesus to call him out of the boat and onto the water with Him. And Jesus does. So, Peter in his own blind faithfulness steps out of the boat. And for a moment, time seems to stop as Peter hovers there on top of the water...eyes on Jesus. But in a blink of an eye, the swirling winds and crashing waves alter Peter's focus and usher back in fear and doubt and Peter begins to sink. And as he does, he cries out to Jesus who reaches out, saves him, and leads him back into the safety of the boat.

The comfort is that Christ comes to us. Christ meets us in the storms of life. In the messy, ugly, chaotic, unfathomable storms of life that often come upon us quite suddenly. Christ is there in the pain of losing a loved one; in the vigil of sitting beside a loved one's bedside; in the jail cell; in the courtroom; in the capsized boat; in the addiction; in the loneliness; on the border – Christ is already there in those places. Christ is already there in the storms of life standing with us; reaching out to help us, save us and guide us, love us and always, always making sure we are never alone.

This passage does not say that life will be easy as it is often anything but. But Jesus reminds us that storms will pop up, suddenly and often. When we find ourselves in those storms it should be no surprise that Christ is already there. Christ is there calling to us and reaching out for us. When we are sidetracked by fear or pain or grief or any number of other things, Christ is STILL there reaching out, lifting us up, and setting us back in the boat to rest before trying again.

There is great comfort in Jesus' grace and compassion for Peter. If we focus on the comfort of this passage, we see God's grace and compassion that is present in the storms of life and in the face of faith AND doubt. But as always, there is another point to this miracle story...the challenge of getting out of the boat in the first place!

Jesus sends the disciples across the sea of Galilee in a small fishing boat – the very same mode of transportation they have used umpteen times before. And while the sudden storms are certainly not unique, for a small boat tossed to-and-fro and for a group of men who would be familiar with what those storms are capable of doing, it would have been scary. Scarier still would have been getting out of that boat and into or even onto the very sea that is churning. Remember life jackets, the coast guard, electricity and flashlights are all modern-day inventions. In great faith, Peter stepped out and for a moment I'm sure it felt like time stood still but then, down he went and Jesus reaches out and pulls him into the boat.

I have always been troubled by this passage and particularly Jesus' response to Peter as they move back into the boat. That's when Jesus says to Peter, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" It is one of those phrases that can be read in two different ways. One is the way of a scolding Jesus who chastises Peter for his lack of faith. It sounds more like an angry parent – a condescending parent. But this is not typically the way we understand Christ interactions with others. So, the more likely tone is that of a more positive nature which is actually grounded in another Scripture from Matthew's gospel.

In Matthew 17:20 Matthew says, "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." In today's text, Jesus and the disciples have just fed 5000+ people with one lunch pail of food. Perhaps Peter has "a little faith" which leads him to be the ONLY disciple brave enough to get out of the boat.ⁱ (Hollingsworth)

Former PCUSA stated clerk Clifton Kirkpatrick writes:

Jesus calls us to leave the safety and security of the boat and walk into the troubled waters where we are to proclaim the life, love and justice of the very God we know in Jesus Christ. Being a disciple is a risky and exciting business but that is exactly what God calls us to do and be, and God assures us that if we get out of the boat, we can count on the accompaniment of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. ⁱⁱ

The challenge of this passage is to have the faith to step out of the boat and into the troubled waters...who knows what you will encounter:

Foster mom Michelle has spent 20 years fostering children. She and her husband have adopted three and were preparing to walk away from fostering when they got a call from an agency asking them to foster immigrant and refugee children. In the last five years, 107 children have walked through their doors... all children separated from parents at the border. Most of them traumatized by the process. But Michelle, her husband and their three teenage children work very hard to offer love and connection and support and an abundance of compassion... as most of them are under the age of 12 and speak a foreign language. Michelle talks about all the different aspects of fostering immigrant children: the frantic tone of the phone calls between the separated parent and child, how heartbreaking it is as she listens to the child cry themselves to sleep; the behaviors that develop as children adapt to their new environment; and the endless fight to help people on all sides of the argument understand that now matter how you feel about immigration these are children – children caught in the middle of a political fight – children worthy of love and a united family. Michelle, her husband and their family...they stepped out of the boat.ⁱⁱⁱ

As disciples, we are called out of the safety of the boat and to show forth the love and justice of Christ in the messiness of life. May each of us be so bold as to take that first step.

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

ⁱ Feasting on the Word; Westminster John-Knox, (Proper 14); pp. 332-337.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.cnn.com/2018/06/21/us/immigrant-children-foster-parents/index.html>