

IN THE MIDST OF THE STORM

This is not the sermon I had planned to preach this morning, but this is the sermon that came to me as I dealt with the aftermath of Tropical Storm Isaias, the sermon that seemed to preach itself to me. I hope it will offer something to you.

The gospel that was chosen by the lectionary for today fortuitously is *Matthew 14:22-33. [Included at the end of the document]

We can certainly understand and empathize with the disciples caught in a small boat in the midst of a great storm. Our storm began some six months ago now, when it became apparent that the corona virus would severely hit our nation, and particularly our region. We locked down in fear of an invisible enemy and our lives radically changed as facemasks and latex gloves, hand sanitizer and social distancing became our new reality.

The waves grew as the effects on the economy of the virus shutdown became obvious. “Unprecedented” became the word of the day used to describe unemployment figures, the number of people living with food insecurity, and, now with the end of the unemployment supplement and the eviction moratorium, we hold our breath at the possibility of unprecedented numbers of homeless.

Our storm grew in intensity with the murder of George Floyd and the great outpouring of protesters demanding justice. In small towns and big cities, stories of police violence have leaked out and the families and friends of its victims now feel empowered to be a presence on town squares and in front of city halls with homemade signs crying for the justice that can bring peace.

In our little corner of the world, these realities have shaken our sense of security, tossing our little boats on the waves of uncertainty. And now this—a storm that proved far more damaging and dangerous than anyone anticipated. For days, many of us have been without power, phone and internet, and for those working at home, that is more than an inconvenience. It is more than loosing all the food in freezer or having no air conditioning. When jobs are scarce, it is frightening.

And so we are right there with those terrified disciples, being tossed and buffeted in the midst of the storm. We could use a miracle about now, so maybe we can learn something from the miracle they experienced.

First, they were terrified. Consider their situation. The disciples were doing what Jesus had told them to do, had, in fact, compelled them to do. They were sailing to the other side of the lake. They were separated from Jesus. They couldn't see him, they didn't know for sure where he was, they had no sense of his presence. They were afraid. And when Jesus did come and they spotted him across the roiling water, their fear turned to terror, for they didn't understand what they were seeing.

At this point Peter made his move. Once Jesus has assured the terror-stricken disciples that it was indeed he, Peter spoke up. “Master, if it’s really you, call me to come to you on the water.” He doubted that Jesus was who he said he is, doubted Jesus was who he had shown himself to be. Feeding the 5,000 and walking on the water were not proof enough. So Peter said, “*If* you are Jesus, prove it. Let me do something extraordinary. Make me different from these other poor frightened slobs in the boat. Grant me an exemption from the laws that restrict ordinary humans. Prove who you are by making me special.”

Peter wanted his own private miracle, which is not an unusual request at all. Most of us ask for them at some time. We ask God to suspend the rules, just this once, just for us, just so we can know God is there. “Heal me, help me, speak to me,” we pray. Let me walk on the water too, then I’ll believe.

Now I don’t want to diminish Peter’s courage in stepping out of the boat and onto the water, but to me that is not the miracle. That was Jesus letting Peter do what he wanted and giving him what he needed. Barbara Brown Taylor suggests, “What Peter needed was a couple of steps on the water (to cure his doubt) and then a nose full of sea water (to cure his pomposity). [*Bread of Angels*, p. 121] The miracle was not a test of how much faith Peter could conjure up, not whether Peter would have just enough faith to keep himself from going under. And isn’t that good news for Peter and for all the rest of us, too?! When Jesus rebukes Peter, it isn’t for looking away. It isn’t for being frightened of the waves. The point at which Peter displays inadequate faith, the point at which he doubts, was when he demanded proof.

So, if the miracle is not Peter walking on the water, what is the miracle? Could the miracle be taking place not on the water, but in the boat? Did you forget about those other disciples? Consider what was happening with them. They stayed in the boat. They were exhausted from battling the wind, drenched from the waves and terrified by the storm and by what they thought was a ghost, but they stayed in the boat. They didn’t turn back or give up. They didn’t try any grandstanding like Peter. They just stayed with the task that Jesus had given them to do. He told them to sail to the other side of the lake and that was what they were trying their darnedest to do. And when things got so scary, they just laid on the oars until Jesus finally came to them. Certainly theirs was not the bold, heroic action of Peter. It was more like the woman who collected the left-over bulletins every Sunday after worship and distributed them at the nursing home, taking time to visit with each person who received one, not heroic, but consistently faithful. Their slugging it out at the oarlocks was more like the folks who, week in and week out, year in and year out, show up to teach Sunday school or sit with the dying or continue to advocate for the poor. The disciples who stayed in the boat were just being faithful to their calling at that moment. No heroics. Not asking for exemptions. Not looking for proof. Just rowing against the wind until Jesus came, no matter how long it took.

Is that the miracle? It certainly is miraculous, that is, it resembles a miracle. It is no small matter to, as Eugene Peterson puts it, maintain “a long obedience in the same direction,” especially when you are being battered by the world outside the boat. [from

book of the same title] Surely Christ and Christ's church need the steadfast as well as the heroic. But this is not the miracle either.

On the surface, the real miracle may not seem as flashy as walking on water or as amazing as calming the storm. It may so subtle that we miss it altogether. But it is a miracle all the same. It cannot be laughed away or explained away. It is the part of the story that reveals something of God, which is the whole purpose of miracles in scripture.

So this is what the miracle looks like. It is Jesus saying to the disciples in the midst of their fear, "It is I, do not be afraid." It is Jesus taking Peter's hand as Peter is in the process of living up to his name, "Rock," and sinking into the sea. Did you catch them? The miracle they demonstrate is that our Lord, the very Son of God, does not abandon us, even in our most frightening circumstances.

Peter's faith in his Lord didn't come because Peter walked on water. He asserted his faith in Jesus when the sea threatened to take him, "Lord, save me." It was in that ultimate of lonely moments, with his life flashing before his eyes, that he called to the only one who could save him, the only one who would not abandon him, the only one in whom he finally could put his trust.

Peter, along with the other disciples, were brought to their knees in faith when they knew that he was there with them, when they realized that even when they hadn't been able to see him or feel his presence, he had been with them then too. It was then they were able to confess, "Truly you are the Son of God."

This is a miracle that is offered to us as well. It is not the promise that with Jesus everything will be fine. It is not the guarantee that he will still all the storms of our lives. It is not the assurance that we will make it to the other side of the lake in tact. And it certainly is not the prod to believe because we will be rewarded. There are far too many Christian martyrs whose deaths disprove those theories.

Rather, the miracle is that Jesus does not leave us alone. He offers us his hand in loving relationship. He overcomes the forces of sin and death arrayed against us. He saves us even when we fail. Our salvation is based in him, not in the strength of our faith. And yet, doesn't this miracle challenge us to faith, just it did the disciples? Doesn't it invite us to fall on our knees and proclaim him Son of God?

The miracle is that the Lord of all creation does not leave us alone--ever. So, do you believe in miracles?

*MATTHEW 14:22-33

Immediately Jesus 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 toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, 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 toward 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 worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Holy wisdom, holy word.
Thanks be to God.