

GET OUT OF THE BOAT - Matthew 14: 22-33
Thirteenth Sunday in Pentecost, August 10, 2008
Calvary Lutheran Church, West Chester, PA + Pastor Roy Almquist

Our Gospel lesson for this morning speaks to us of believers in a small boat, the sudden appearance of a frightening storm, and then the calming, saving presence of Jesus, walking on the water. The story speaks in a wonderful way of an event that was considered so important that the Early Church included it in the Bible.

But what do we make of this story today? In many ways it sounds ludicrous to our Twenty-first Century ears ... men walking on water, a powerful force stilling a storm, and people changed from fear to faith. But despite its bizarre nature, the story speaks volumes to us about what it means to be a Christian and what it means to be the Church.

When the Bible speaks about the power of God, it invariably speaks about water. Long ago people believed that the sea was the place where all evil forces dwelled. For that reason many of the great Old Testament stories .. the Creation narratives, the story of Noah and the ark, Jonah's encounter with a great fish, and, of course, the deliverance of the people of Israel from captivity in Egypt .. are set in the context of a struggle with the sea. God is seen as the force that delivers people from chaos and destruction, most clearly identified with water.

Water continues to be a source of fear, but water is not the only thing we fear. We live in very frightening times. No one lives a "safe" life anymore. We fear for the future of our children. We fear the degrading of the environment – 80% of Americans are concerned about impact of global warming. We fear economic uncertainty, which impacts both young and old alike. We fear an illness that can be both physically and financially destroy us. People feel out of control over the things that matter the most .. *like the disciples in that little ship, amidst the stormy sea.*

In a way, Matthew's story of Jesus walking on the water is not so much a miracle as it is a proclamation. Do you remember what the Gospel lesson records Jesus saying to the disciples? *It is I .. do not be afraid!* In much the same way God revealed himself to Moses in a burning bush with the words, *I am who I am* [Exodus 3: 1-6]. Matthew has Jesus reveal himself to the disciples, as the one who stills the storm and has power over all that frightens us. Jesus is the one who reaches out to us when we are caught in the storms of life, when unexpected turbulence comes upon us.

As we see Jesus grab Peter's arm, we are reminded that Our Lord has the same power to strengthen us and hold us in the moment of our greatest need. One of my favorite Old Testament texts is a reading from the 41 and 43 chapters of Isaiah:

Fear not, for I am with you, be not afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand. [Isaiah 41: 10]

Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name and you are mine. When you pass through the waters I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you. [Isaiah 43: 1-4]

For me, that is the essence of the Christian faith ... we belong to the Lord, we are united with Him, and nothing can ever separate us from that glorious promise. We may feel in danger ... our burdens may seem more than we can bear, but we have Our Lord's assurance that we shall never be abandoned.

There is a second significant emphasis in our Gospel lesson. This wonderful story tells us something profound about the Church. The Church of Jesus Christ has always been *a frail little boat*, filled with frightened, doubting people, tossed upon a sea of circumstances beyond their control. We may not like to think of the Church as a fragile structure, filled with frightened people, but that's the way it is.

Our Gospel lesson challenges us to see Jesus Christ, calling us to be open to the future, ready to take risks, and, indeed, to step out of the boat. Will we dare to set aside rules and sacred traditions, will we encourage new people to share in the ministry of our congregation, will we try just as hard to please people who are not in our church as we try to please our members?

The Gospel speaks to us on a personal level and a congregational level this morning and the message is the same: We must place our trust in Jesus Christ. We must let Jesus be our hope and our vision. That is what Peter did. He placed his faith in the one who said to him boldly and clearly: Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.

Jesus stands before us in the midst of the oppressed, the disadvantaged, the imprisoned, the despairing and he calls to us to step out into the unknown, to take a risk for the sake of those who need us. Jesus calls his Church to dare to move away from comfortable and security in order to witness to those who do not know of the Savior's love ... to serve those who are in greatest need:

*Jesus calls us, o'er the tumult, of our life's wild, restless sea
Day by day his sweet voice sounding, Saying "Christian, follow me."*
[Cecil Frances Alexander, 1818-1895, ELW #696]

I believe that one of the great challenges that comes to us is the challenge to join Peter and get out of the boat. I think it is very clear why we never find a St. Nathaniel or a St. James the Lesser Lutheran Church. These disciples never left the boat!

I believe we are all called upon to find a time and a place where we can step out of the boat. Like Peter, we need to leave the safety of the boat and walk toward Jesus, buoyed by the knowledge that his presence and protection are available to us.

This morning we will be recognizing two young women from our congregation who are very literally stepping out of the boat of comfort and security in order to follow Jesus. They will tell us more about what they will be doing during the coming year, but basically they will be giving their lives away for the benefit of others. Lindsay Crum will be teaching English in a church-run high school in Martin, Slovakia. Danielle Lynch will be a volunteer worker in the Amani School for Homeless Youth in Moshi, Tanzania.

What about you? Where are you stepping out of the boat? Christian service in the world is not something required of us in order to win God's love. No, service in the world is something we do as an expression of our thanks for all that God has done for us.

Get out of the boat! That is the challenge we hear today. You have probably noticed that there are no seat belts on the church pews. Jesus wants you to find a way to get up and serve:

- Perhaps God is calling you to a teaching ministry in the church
- We need volunteers to fix meals for those in need, people to deliver meals and provide transportation, we need people to help with hospitality here at Calvary.
- We need people who will teach English to new residents, visit and encourage people in prison, take time to call on Calvary's sick and shut-in members, and swing a hammer for *Good Works* and *Calvary Builders*.
- We need people who will care enough about our young people that they will serve as advisors for our youth groups and as mentors in our Confirmation program.

So let us hold onto our hope amidst the strong winds and waves of life. Let us try, albeit inadequately, to enter into the problems of others, always remembering ... Take heart, we are on the Lord's errand and we are not alone. If we learn nothing else from our Gospel lesson, let us learn this: *Wherever Jesus Christ is .. the wildest storm becomes calm.* Let us cling to that promise .. now and always. AMEN.