

10th Sunday after Pentecost August 9, 2020

Matthew 14:22-33

The Sea of Galilee is a unique lake. It is the lowest freshwater lake on earth at between 215 and 209 feet below sea level. It is only about 64 square miles total (about the same area as the city of Davenport). It's about 8 miles wide at its widest and 13 miles long, and is relatively shallow, averaging a depth of 84 feet.

The Sea of Galilee is also known for its violent storms, which can come up suddenly and can be life-threatening for any on its waters. These storms are caused by the geography of the lake with steep hills on all sides. The cooler air masses from the surrounding mountains funnel through the east-west-oriented valleys in the Galilean hill country and rush down the western hillsides of the lake colliding with the warm air in the lake's basin. The most violent storms, however, are caused by the fierce winds which blow off the Golan Heights from the east. Because the lake is small and relatively shallow, these winds can have a devastating effect. One such storm in March of 1992 sent waves ten feet high crashing into downtown Tiberias and caused significant damage to the city.

This is the situation the disciples find themselves in. The storm came to them as darkness fell, the wind blowing against them, waves tossing them about, knocking them to and fro, banging against each other and the boat. The word used implies that it was like torture; painful and constant.

Their whole night was this, twelve hours of fighting the wind and waves. Trying to make progress, but not making headway. Probably near the middle of the lake, certainly several miles from shore. In the dim light of the early morning, the

battered disciples peer through the storm and see something, a figure coming to them on the water.

Already exhausted by their efforts during the night, sleep deprived, stressed from the constant worry and fear that the boat would sink and they would die, this is the last straw. They are terrified that this is a ghost, coming for them. A harbinger of death. The word used to describe their vocalization of this fear is one that is onomatopoeic, a term for a raven's piercing cry. A croak or inarticulate shout of deep emotion.

In their fear and exhaustion, they don't see that it is Jesus. The one who stilled the wind and the sea the last time they were caught in a storm. They don't see relief coming to them, only death.

At their cry, immediately, Jesus identifies himself. "Take heart, it's me, don't be afraid"

Peter responds. "Okay, if it is indeed you, tell me to get out of the boat and come to you." Jesus says, "Come" and Peter goes.

And he walks on the water. Moving toward Jesus. The waves still rise about him, the wind still howls, but he's walking on water. Until. Until he sees the winds, sees what it is like outside the boat and he is seized by fear. Then, he begins to sink. He cries out, "Lord, save me!!"

Immediately, Jesus reaches out and grabs him. "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Takes Peter back to the boat. And once they are all in the boat, together, the wind, the source of their torture and lack of progress ceases.

Have you ever had an experience like the disciples? Maybe not a night of being thrown about on the sea but a time when you were battered by life. Where it felt like nothing was going right and you weren't making any progress. A series of events that just kept hitting you. The death of a parent, the illness of a friend, your own health crisis all in a row. 2020 anyone!? Pandemic, loss of a job, people getting sick and dying.

Have you felt fear like that of the disciples, sharp and clear, bringing an involuntary cry to your lips? Or, perhaps it is more that sinking feeling in your stomach, a burning and churning fear that eats you up inside. A constant gnawing about how you will pay the bills, find a job, take care of dad.

The fear the disciples feel is not lack of faith, but acknowledgment of reality. It is dangerous on the boat, in the sea, in a storm. They could die or be hurt. The fear that we feel is that way as well. There are things in this world and in our lives that are fearful. This virus, the return of cancer. Fear for the stability of a fragile relationship, of loneliness after loss, of not being accepted by those we esteem, of what future our congregation has, of the direction of our country.... you name it, there is a lot in our individual, congregational, and civic lives that can make us afraid.

And that fear can be debilitating. Look at Peter.

He responds to Jesus' call to come to him. To get out of the boat, in the middle of a stormy sea, and walk on the water. He gets out of the only thing that has kept

him alive all night. He steps into the teeth of the tempest that he has been fighting with the others to keep at bay.

And Peter walks on the water, moving toward Jesus. Don't tell me he lacks faith. He responds to Jesus command, he walks on water, and almost makes it. Almost gets to Jesus. Gets within arm's reach, until. Until the fear catches up to him. It is when his fear (a very real and well-earned fear) comes to the forefront of his mind that things fall apart, and he begins to sink.

Fear is debilitating. It can come out of nowhere, paralyze us, and make it difficult to move forward at all, let alone with confidence. When this happens, we begin to sink.

Yet, even in his fear, Peter does not croak out some unintelligible cry. Even as he is sinking into the sea, he has faith in Jesus. He cries out, "Lord, save me."

And Jesus immediately catches him. It is the promise of Romans enacted, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. No one who believes in him will be put to shame."

Lord, save me! A cry of trust, of faith. From a man whose faith in Jesus got him this close, through a fearful tempest of wind and waves.

Note well, Jesus does not give him a 10-step program to overcoming his fear. He does not encourage him to believe more, to keep his eyes on Jesus. He doesn't say, you failed the test. No, Jesus immediately grabs him. Lifts him up. Takes him back to the relative safety of the boat.

What then do we make of Jesus' response once he has Peter in his grasp, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

It can be heard as a criticism. But I wonder if it is not more a statement of fact, that it is an encouragement. See, Peter (and we) have heard over the last few weeks about the power of a little bit. A little seed produces a great tree. A little yeast in bunch of flour leavens the whole lot. Five loaves and two fish that feeds 5,000 plus. What if Jesus' words are more an encouragement, "You have a little faith, so why did you doubt?"

A wonderful reminder to Peter in the midst of his fear, made more powerful by the experience of the promise, that when we falter Jesus will catch us up. This promise is our hope. That Jesus will lift us up. Will always pursue us. Will keep us from drowning; in our grief, in our fear, in our despair.

Fear is real, it is not something that will go away because we are people of faith. Jesus does not say, "Follow me and you will never fear again." He does not say, "Follow me and everything will be a breeze." Rather, the promise is "I will lift you up when you begin to sink." "I will raise you up when you fall down." "I will sustain you when you are weary." I will pursue you when you are lost. I will never, ever, ever let you go. Our God in Jesus says, "You're mine and I'm jealous of you. "

Note something else about this story, the wind does not cease until Jesus, Peter held safely in his grasp, comes back into the boat. The calm comes when the community is together with Jesus in their midst. This too, is the promise. That here in this assembly, with these people, (even virtually) there will be calm in the midst of the storms of our life. Why else do you think we had such a response to

our online worship early on in the pandemic? Here we will share tears and laughter, joys and sorrows. Here, surrounded in song, filled with the Word of God in Jesus, the promise of forgiveness and hope, here we will find respite from the storms. Peace. Calm.

This is why I do what I do. Because I have seen the peace in the midst of life's storms that Jesus can bring to people. I have felt that- even when I have been tossed about like a rag doll by life.

This is why we invest our time and energy into Bible Study and Children's Faith Formation. This is why we do book studies and encourage you to join us in worship and learning. Because it is in these ways that we see more clearly how Jesus is present with us. How we are called to live. Because as we grow in faith, and our understanding of Christ present, the storms of this world will calm around us. Because in these things, we will know that even when we feel like we are drowning Jesus lifts us up.

So, when you are feeling afraid, battered by the storms of life, sinking in the raging seas- know that you have a savior- one who will lift you up- Jesus. Know that you have a community of fellow sufferers to which Jesus will bring you. And that when we are together with Jesus- the winds will cease, progress will be made towards the shore. Together we worship the Son of God- Jesus Christ- sharing the stories of how he pulled us from the waves and brought us to safety. Then going forth singing our faith defiantly into the winds that seek to sink us- that fierce joy that proclaims- I'm so glad, Jesus lifted me. Let all those who have been lifted up from the raging seas to join me in singing this now.