

The Lifeboat

Psalm 84:1-7
Matthew 14:22-32

As I prepared to write this sermon I learned something that surprised me. The Sea of Galilee's surface elevation is seven hundred feet *below* sea level. The River Jordan both feeds and drains the Sea of Galilee. I knew that as it reaches the Dead Sea, the Jordan descends to nearly twice that level, 1,388 feet below sea level, the lowest spot on the face of the earth. But I never suspected the river dropped below sea level so far north. Ironically, it is rather hard to descend while swimming in the Dead Sea. It has so much salt in its water it gives people terrific buoyancy. These little fun facts have no application whatsoever to this sermon. I just felt like sharing them!

A couple of weeks ago we spoke of how the Gospel of Matthew has thematic units, connected by broad summary statements called *inclusios*. Chapters 14 and 15 contain several miracle stories. Here we find the feeding of the 5,000 with a few loaves and fish, the healing of a Canaanite woman whom Matthew labels demon-possessed, our own story of Jesus (and temporarily, Peter) walking on water, and more. Other miracles sprinkle throughout this Gospel, but here they are most condensed. New Testament scholar Alfred Beare writes that it appears almost as if Matthew, “wanted to establish Jesus' credentials as the Son of God before going any further.” He sets up our story with a peculiar verse. It tells us Jesus ordered away the

crowds he had just fed, then commands his disciples to climb into a boat and leave him alone on the shore. The next verse resolves any perplexity this may cause us. Jesus just wanted to be alone to pray. Herod had ordered his cousin John Baptist's execution just before the feeding. It had been a spiritually exhausting few days.

Evening falls. We find Jesus still praying. The disciples have rowed a great distance out into the Sea of Galilee, despite being "beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them." Matthew tells us Jesus starts toward them "in the fourth watch of the night." This would be late, just before dawn. They have had a rough go of it for some time. And while at least four of the disciples have worked as fishermen—on this very lake—before following Jesus, no doubt they all felt alarmed. A few days before moving here, Linda and I, our son and his great friend Mike went out on Grand Traverse Bay in a friend's speed boat. We motored out to Power Island, a popular spot for picnics, and moored on the east side of the island, in the shade of its ancient white and red pine trees. We hiked around and enjoyed a picnic of our own.

Suddenly Captain Steve, our friend, cast a worried look at the sky. It had swiftly turned from glorious and sunny to threatening, with black clouds racing in over the trees. A storm had blown in from our blind spot. We had a quick discussion about whether to ride it out on the island or try to beat the storm. Since we had no rain gear we decided to take the boat at least to the tip of the island, where we could see how close and how big the storm was. When we reached the tip, we saw the storm front flying in from the southwest. To the northwest we could still see blue sky. Steve hit

the throttle and we raced to the northwest. He had an inboard diesel engine that could make that boat *move*. Steve also grew up out on the water at Cape Cod. He was used to rough water and was enjoying the ride. The rest of us were terrified. But Steve drove us *around* that storm, to a safe landing at the boat ramp.

When have you exerted yourself over time under frightening conditions? Have you turned to Jesus when you have? Matthew tells us he walked on the water out to their boat. They mistake him for a ghost. They grow even more scared. In our English translations he says, "Take heart, it is I; have no fear." In the Greek Matthew wrote Jesus actually says, "Take heart, I AM; fear not." That I AM follows the form convention established by the Hebrews for their way of obliquely referring to God: Yahweh. Built on four Hebrew consonants, Yahweh actually means I AM. This gives us yet another case in which Jesus does in fact claim his own divinity. I AM GOD, is what he means. In the original Greek, Peter replies, "Lord, if YOU ARE, bid me come out to you on the water." To whom else might this fisherman request permission and the power to walk on water himself? Only to God would he make such an audacious request. In fact, one verse after our passage ends, Matthew tells us the disciples "worshiped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'"

In between these two verbal exchanges Peter tries, and fails, to walk on water. Actually, this is not fair. Peter walks for a few steps. But the wind and the waves scare the faith right out of him. He starts to sink. Note that Matthew tells us, "Jesus *immediately* reached out and caught him." This lessens the sting of his mild rebuke,

“O one of little faith, why did you doubt?” Peter doubts because every one of his considerable experiences on water has formed in him great respect for its threats. He has watched others get hurt, maybe drown, in calmer conditions than these. It only *makes sense* for him to doubt. As I interpret this incident I believe Jesus wants to accomplish a list of things through it. He wants to display his godly power. He wants his disciples to venture out in faith. And he loves them enough, even when they fail, to reach out and catch them.

Writing nearly one hundred years ago, the Roman Catholic priest and theologian Alfred Loisy, posited the theory that this episode foreshadows Peter's denial of Christ and subsequent restoration at the crucifixion. The same two men play their parts in each episode. Once again Peter boldly sets out on a risky course of action. He trails the arrested Jesus all the way to the high priest's house. He warms himself at the fires in the courtyard. But when a servant woman accuses him, with his funny Galilean accent, of following Jesus, three times he denies it. Jesus has predicted this would happen. But when the resurrected Jesus reunites with his remaining followers, he makes a point of giving Peter grace. Loisy points out the arc of the walking on water episode perfectly matches this later episode. Perhaps Matthew was a more sophisticated writer than we may have thought!

The obvious application of these two stories is that we can take solace that Christ will restore us as well after our failures and denials—if we just keep on following him. In his book, [The Prodigal Son: a Story of Homecoming](#), Henri Nouwen wrote,

“For a very long time I considered low self-esteem to be some kind of virtue. But now I realize that the real sin is to deny God’s first love for me...Because without claiming that first love and that original goodness for myself, I lose touch with my true self and embark on the destructive search among the wrong people and in the wrong places for what can only be found in the house of my Father.” Many of us do not believe in ourselves quite as we ought to. We have low spiritual self-esteem. Nouwen points to the sinfulness of this attitude. We ought to be, as he wrote, claiming God's love for us. When we do we experience the same grace and gain in effectiveness in our missions, as individuals and as churches. Remember, he reaches out to us no matter how we behave, as long as we keep following him.

Today's bulletin insert for the stewardship campaign includes this excellent line: “The Good News is that in the midst of the storm Jesus appears in the boat... sometimes the risen Jesus sustains the church while the church is battered and facing into a wind that blows against us.” Friday afternoon, WFIU radio broadcast a discussion by public health officials. They brought the *wonderful* news that Australia has had a severe flu season with a powerful variant. Since flu season starts each year in the Pacific Islands and Australasia, this does not bode well for the rest of the world. On top of this, RSV, a wildly contagious respiratory virus, has already hit our nation. Hospitals, including our two, are already full of RSV positive patients. As I typed this line I reflected on the fact that I spent three and a half hours in the ER this week. Whee. Finally, we seem to have this nagging memory of yet a third virus recently giving us a spot of bother. Oh right. COVID.

These public health officials sounded full of despair. They know a triple-whammy is going to hit. But because of pandemic fatigue people have long since tuned out their messaging. As one of them said, "The blow back we're getting is just so exhausting." So must Jesus' disciples have felt on the Sea of Galilee. So must many of us feel when a loved one receives a challenging medical diagnosis, so must the pastors and lay leaders of aging congregations that just cannot seem to attract newer and younger members to continue their mission. The insert speaks of that as well. Praise God we at Central Presbyterian do not face this particular problem! Praise God for our active young families! We have faced other challenges, though, through the pandemic and around certain cultural and spiritual issues.

Praise God therefore that Jesus still catches us when we flounder. But we must follow him closely enough to be within his reach. And we must reach back to him to create the saving handclasp. One way to stay close enough is to invest in the mission of his church. Invest your money, sure, and I have no problem asking you prayerfully to consider pledging for next year. In fact, I ask that you consider pledging even more than you are already giving as we try to keep pace with inflation. But stewardship honestly does involve giving of every resource we possess. Time, energy, love, skills: they have all come to us from the great I AM. Give a portion of them back and you will be practicing a spiritual discipline that keeps you close enough to Jesus to get pulled up out of whatever waves wash over you. When we follow Jesus he protects us. Follow him closely and bravely.