

Matthew 14:22-33

Struggling in the Storm

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama

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22 Immediately [after the feeding of the 5,000], Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. 23 And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray.

When evening came, he was there alone, 24 but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. 25 And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. 26 But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear.

27 But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." 28 Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." 29 He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. 30 But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" 31 Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

32 When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. 33 And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

For the Word of God in scripture, for the Word of God among us,
for the Word of God within us: Thanks be to God.

There's a particular storm I'll never forget. I worked as a counselor at my presbytery camp for three of my summers of college. The camp was on a lake, and we had sailboats—little, two-three person Sunfishes. One day, my co-counselor and I took our campers across the lake for an overnight. The next morning, we got them on their boats, made sure they had their life-jackets on, then set off—a little fleet of junior high kids, my co-counselor and I, spread out over about eight boats. The kids were on their own, but we'd taught them all the safety rules. Even so, we had barely left shore when I saw the kids in their boats peeling off their lifejackets. I yelled to them to put them back on, but somehow, they just couldn't hear me, even though it was a calm, quiet, blue-sky day, there in the cove.

That all changed, the moment we sailed clear of the trees and into the open water. The sky was still clear, but suddenly, wind came from everywhere—blasting hard from every direction. There was no way to tack into the wind, because it kept shifting, and it was powerful. All around me, I watched those little boats capsizing, while I struggled to keep my own, upright. All those masts, crashing into the water. All those kids without lifejackets—I just knew we were going to lose some of them. I was terrified, with no way to help.

Our passage today also takes place on a lake in a storm. I've been following a preaching plan from our denomination that gives sermon prompts each week. The

sermon prompt this week asks, “What tempests are you experiencing now?” I almost laughed. “Hmm. What tempests? Nothing comes to mind!”

In fact, it’s as though we are in the middle of several major tempests all at once—Covid, racial reckoning, Climate Change, economic collapse--any one of which could be enough to capsize us. And, as the meme that keeps popping up on my Social Media says, “We’re all in the same storm, but we’re not all in the same boat.”

Even if this pandemic were the only storm we were facing, we still wouldn’t all be in the same boat, because it’s hitting us all from different directions, with different kinds of impacts. It’s hitting people of color harder than white families; the wealthy harder than the poor; the elderly harder than the young; families with children at home harder than empty-nesters or single people; the disease is hitting men harder than women, the socio-economic impacts are hitting women harder than men. And then, there are the personal storms that are made worse by the shutdown—facing cancer, without being able to gather with your support group. Facing abuse, and being trapped in the house with your abuser. Struggling with an addiction you thought you’d had under control, only to find yourself sinking again.

I’m thrown back to that day at camp—out there on the lake. I’m aware of all of you, out there in the storm, all around me. I can see the waves surging. I can see

your boats tipping, and I wonder what I can even do to help, here, as I struggle to keep my own boat upright.

My own boat is pretty empty—just my husband and me. Our struggle is how to stay connected—how to stay connected to our parents, who are so far away from us, and who have to face health issues without our help or our presence. How to stay connected with our grown children, also at a distance, and our two small grandchildren. How to stay connected with the two different congregations that we pastor, and keep those ministries alive and vital.

But I think about our elderly members, especially those who live alone—how isolating that would be, especially with no way to experience human touch. I know that the length of time this is dragging on is not making that easier.

I think about you parents whose boats are full of young children who would normally be in daycare, older kids who would normally be in school. Even without the buffeting wind, I imagine your boats are hard to keep upright, hard to keep the weight evenly distributed and to keep from going crazy. Hard to do your work and earn the money that pays for all the things you need. But now fall is looming, and you're faced with the big decision of whether to send your kids back to school. If you do send them back, are you risking their health, or the health of the more vulnerable people in your boat? If you don't send them back, are you risking their

future by consigning them to a second-rate education—not to mention risking their social and emotional health, along with your own?

And you teachers, whose boats may or may not be full of family, as well: when you went into this profession, I'm guessing no one told you that you were expected to risk your lives to do it. Yet, over the last couple of decades, it's become an assumption that you should be ready to take a bullet for your students. Now you're also expected to risk death by virus, for yourself or for other members of your family.

And what about our church—if we don't gather, we risk the connections that we have to one another, unraveling. Will we even *have* a church by the time this is over? And if we *were* to gather—would we even have a church by the time *that* was over?

So many storms, so many different boats, all of us out there, struggling and afraid.

The disciples were all in one boat. All night they'd been pulling against the storm without feeling like they were getting anywhere. They were exhausted and terrified. They were even more terrified when they saw Jesus, refreshed from his time of prayer, walking toward them across the water. They certainly didn't expect him to show up there, in that way—so they thought he was a ghost. Peter, never

one to hold back, blurted out, “Lord, if it’s really you, command me to come to you on the water.” So Jesus shrugged, “Fine! Come!” and Peter got out of the boat.

It’s like one of those moments when Wiley E. Coyote goes running off a cliff, looks down, and then plummets. Peter steps out onto the water, and he’s good for just a moment—then he looks around, remembers the storm, and he sinks. It’s a good thing Jesus is there—because he grabs Peter, says, “Why did you doubt me?” and hauls him into the boat. Then, the winds calmed down, and, we’re told, “Everyone in the boat worshiped him.” It’s kind of an odd way to put it—“everyone in the boat”—because, by that point, everyone in the story *was* in the boat—there was no one out there in the water. Peter’s little walk-around was over, and he was with them—dripping though he may have been.

You know, the funny thing is, I don’t know how many sermons I’ve preached over the years about how we need to have enough faith to get out of the boat. Now, though, as I read it, that doesn’t seem to be the message, at all. During the worst of the storm, it’s only because they’re working together that the disciples manage to stay afloat. And then, when they need him most, Jesus comes to them. Right where they are. Right in the middle of the storm. Asking Peter to get out of the boat wasn’t Jesus’ idea—it was Peter’s. He dared Jesus to command him to do so, and the dare was based, not on faith, but on doubt: “Lord, *if it’s you*, command me to come to you on the water.” If I were Jesus, I might have been tempted to let him

sink. Fortunately, Jesus is more merciful than I am. He grabs Peter before he can go under and plops him back in with the others. There, in the boat, Peter is finally able to worship.

And maybe that's the message to us, right now, as we're being blasted from every direction. First, that we can't maintain our faith by ourselves. No one is asking you to walk on water, and this is not a time to prove what a rugged individualist you are. This is a time when we absolutely need one another. So, the big challenge isn't how do we get out of the boat, but how, in this fractured time, can we find a way to get together in the same boat. Not literally, unfortunately, since we need to stay socially-distanced. But how can we find ways to strengthen our connections, even from a distance, so that we can lift one another up when we're sinking, and feel the strength of a whole community pulling in the same direction?

It takes me back to that day in the storm with my campers. Thankfully, no one died. The folks back at the main camp could see the conditions out on the water, they knew that we were overdue to return, so they sent the motor boat out to find us. They helped get the capsized boats righted and the sails lowered, then they towed those boats and their passengers, one by one, back to shore.

So, if you realize that you haven't seen someone recently in one of our Zoom gatherings, or heard from them in some other way, or if you just have a sense that

something's not right, please go looking for them. Send an email. Make a phone call. Drop off a meal.

Or if you feel like you're the one whose sinking, call out, like Peter did. I know it can be incredibly hard to ask for help, but that's why we're here—that's why we're fellow-travelers in this big boat that we call the church. Because we want to be there for one another. We want to be called upon when someone else needs help. We want to know that, when *we* start to drown, our rescuers are close at hand.

This storm has been going on for way longer than any of us ever imagined—and it looks like we're in it for the long haul. I know we are all depleted. But so were those first disciples. Jesus knew they were struggling, so he went looking for them, walking across the water to reach them. Even once he climbed inside, their journey wasn't over—they still had a way to go. But with him in their midst, the wind grew calm, and they were granted the peace they needed to see them through.

So if you're out of the boat, come climb in. If you see someone floundering, reach out a hand. Christ will come to us as we stay gathered together in our expanded boat, and help us to make it the rest of the way, safely to shore. Thanks be to God.