

Matthew 14:22-33

August 9, 2020

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“Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead, while he dismissed the crowds.”

“Immediately” is a word of urgency, but it invites us to pause and look back first before we “go on ahead.” Just before the story we’ve heard in the Gospel reading this morning, Jesus has done something amazing. He takes two small loaves of bread and a handful of dried sardines, and with this little bit of food, feeds over five thousand people. “And immediately…” he sends the disciples out onto the lake in the boat, and he himself goes up into the hills to pray in solitude.

Going up to the mountain to be near God is a recurrent theme in the scriptures. Moses receives the Commandments on the holy mountain in the wilderness; in our first reading this morning from the book of Kings, the prophet Elijah is running for his life and takes refuge in the mountains, where God speaks to him in silence. The mountains are harsh and remote and dangerous; you don’t go there for a snow-covered vacation in the winter season. But Jesus goes there, often, to meet God and to listen for that still, small, voice.

Meanwhile the disciples are out on the open water. “Sea” isn’t exactly the right word—body of water called “The Sea of Galilee” is a freshwater lake, but it’s BIG. For the people of Jesus’ time, open water of any kind was a dangerous place. Storms could appear quickly and without warning; even experienced sailors could be shipwrecked and lost. In the book of Genesis, open water is the place of Chaos and Creation: unpredictable, changeable, potentially catastrophic. It can be a place of disaster and death—so when the disciples see Jesus in the midst of the storm, they cry out in fear “It is a ghost!”

“Take heart/take courage/be of good cheer” Jesus answers them. “It is I.”

That translation “It is I” makes good English of Jesus’ words. But what he actually says is “I am.” “I AM”—the divine name, given to Moses out of the burning bush; “I AM” echoed in the Hebrew scriptures as the Name that is not a noun, but a verb. “I AM”—the Vine, the Good Shepherd, the Way, and the Truth, and the Life.

Matthew wants us to know who this Jesus is. I AM signals the divine identity, in just two words.

Peter replies. “Well, Jesus, if YOU ARE…have me walk with you on the water!”

“Come on!” Jesus tells him.

So he slips off the side of the boat, and begins to walk to meet Jesus.

“But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and began to sink, and cried out ‘Lord, save me!’”

IMMEDIATELY (again!) Jesus is there, grasping him by the hand, lifting him up. “Little-faith, why did you doubt?”

Jesus rebukes Peter, but it is the kindest and most loving rebuke. “Little faith” is not an accusation, it is a nickname. “Silly man, don’t you trust me? I’ve got you!”
And going into the boat, the storm ceased.

That Jesus walks on water in the midst of the storm shows that he is who he says he is: I AM. He has authority over the places of chaos and danger and creative potency. He is the presence of God, moving over the waters of Chaos once again, breathing forth God’s spirit and saying “Let there be, let there be, let there be!”

The miracle is not that Jesus walks on water, or calms the storms. The miracle is that Jesus calls Peter—and us—to walk with him amid the storms and chaos and energy that can destroy and create the cosmos. We are invited to walk in faith, even in the places that seem utterly destructive and disastrous, “Little-faiths” as we are, as Jesus’ friends and companions on the way.

Peter walks toward Jesus until he “sees the wind” and is overtaken by fear. But you can’t actually see wind. You can see the results of it, but the wind itself is unseen. “The wind (Spirit) blows where it will, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.” (John 3:8)

The wind/spirit/Spirit of God blows across the waters of chaos as at the beginning, whispering “Let there be, let there be, let there be...”
And there was, and there was, and there was.
And it was good, good, so good.

This is a creation story. Jesus has just fed thousands of people with a handful of bread and fish. There’s so very little to work with there, but in Jesus’ hands it is enough.
Now he is shown as the one from whom the wheat and the yeast and the fish and the grapes and every living creature and the entire cosmos have their very existence.
In fear Peter cries out for help, and immediately Jesus is there with him, holding and lifting him up.
“Little-faith, I’ve got you.
Trust me.
Even just a little faith, a tiny bit, will be enough.”

When the storms of life are raging, stand by me.
When the storms of life are raging, stand by me.
When the world is tossing me, like a ship out on the sea,
Thou who rulest wind and water, stand by me.