

Sermon Pentecost 10A - Drive in Worship

Rev. Ginger Litman-Koon

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Matthew 14:22-33

[Jesus] made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side [of the Sea of Galilee], while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

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There's an old Zen Story that goes like this: Three monks sat by a placid lake, deep in meditation. One stood up and said, "I've forgotten my prayer mat." Stepping on to the waters before him, he walked across to the other side, where their small hut stood, and returned the same way, striding along the water. When he returned, the second monk said, "I just remembered I haven't hung my clothes out to dry." He too, strode calmly across the water to the other bank and returned in a few minutes the same way. The third monk watched them intently. Figuring that this was a test of his faith, he cried out, "Is your learning so superior to mine? I think not! I too can match any feat either of you can perform!" With that the young monk rushed to the water's edge so that he too could walk upon the water. No sooner did he put his foot in than he fell into waist-high water. Unfazed, he climbed out and tried again. And again and again, to no avail.

After watching this performance in silence from the lakeshore, one of his fellow monks asked the other, "Do you suppose we should tell him where the stepping stones are?" (PAUSE) Today, we encounter both a testament to Jesus' power and a test of Peter's faith in the story of Jesus walking on the water. It's such a beautiful image, portrayed by many artists over time, especially as the Gospel writer notes that Jesus' miraculous passage occurs early in the morning, perhaps just as the sun is beginning to rise.

And typically, one would focus primarily on what happens after Jesus sets off on foot across the lake. But what struck me when I was reading this story this time was what Jesus did before leaving dry land. First, before he's even done with the crowds who just finished eating their fill of the loaves & fishes, Jesus "makes" the disciples get into the boat and go ahead across the lake. Then he goes up the mountain by himself to pray. A bit curious that Jesus sends the disciples along without him, especially if his plan is to be in the boat with them by morning. And it made me remember what Pastor Kris had said last week about Jesus' just having learned about the death of John the Baptist, prior to feeding the 5,000.

Before the crowds descended upon him out there in the deserted place, he had gone out there there to be alone. He had just heard that his cousin, his herald, the prophet, John had just been senselessly killed. So maybe he still needed to be alone. He just never quite got that time to himself he came out seeking. He hadn't

turned the crowds away when they found him, because he had compassion on them. But he still needed that time to be still with God.

So he sent the disciples away in the boat, and he went to pray. They might have been worried about how they'd be reunited with him, but he was not. His priority was to spend time alone with God. And so he went up to the mountain to pray. When evening came, the boat was now far from shore, and, Matthew tells us, he was still praying. It was not till early in the morning that he made his way across the water. He was not concerned about the distance, the time that elapsed, or the conditions of the sea. He was going to get away, he was going to pray, and then he was going to get to his disciples.

So to me, the opening of this story tells us two things: First, as the old song says, "You gotta pray when the Spirit says pray." "If the Spirit says pray, you gotta pray right now, You gotta pray when the Spirit says pray." Don't worry about the inconvenience, Like Nike - just do it. And second, if Jesus needs to get to you, he'll get to you. And if he needs you to get to him, he'll help you find a way.

Now, more than ever, we need Jesus by our side. We need Jesus in our boat. Truth be told, we're not going to get anywhere during this time unless he is in our boat. But, like the disciples, when we look for him, all we seem to see is the darkness of night, the waves crashing all around us, and maybe a ghost. How, we wonder, is some far-off thought-he-was-already-dead guy going to get across all these waves and find his way into our boat?

The expanse between Jesus and us can seem so wide. For us, we might see the expanse of time - "Didn't Jesus live 2,000 years ago?" Or we might feel the distance in our waning faith - "I wish I had the fervor for my faith I felt years ago." And the obstacles that surround us can seem so great. We might look out and see the busy-ness of living life, or the ever-rising COVID death toll or the rabidly polarized culture we're living in, and wonder how Jesus will ever make his way through the onslaught of these waves beating against our boat? But Jesus is not concerned with the time that's passed. He's not concerned with how long it's been since you reached out in prayer. He's not concerned with how different things seem now than when he called his disciples so many years ago.

And he's not worried about the obstacles we see in his way. He's not going to be stopped by the depth of the ocean or the howling wind, or a raging pandemic or the waves of fear that seem to be battering our vessels on all sides. If Jesus needs to get to us, he's going to get to us. And if it's we who need to take the first step towards him, he'll stretch out his hand and call to us, "Come." And if we start sinking, his hand will catch us and his mighty arm will save us. Jesus doesn't subscribe to our timelines, he isn't bound by our perceived roadblocks, and he isn't intimidated by our fears. He is coming, knee-deep in the crashing waves arms outstretched against the wind, to join us, to grab hold of us, no matter how far we find ourselves from the safety of the shore.

Another Zen story tells of a young monk who, while on a journey, came to the banks of a wide river. Staring hopelessly at the great obstacle in front of him, he pondered for hours on just how to cross such a wide expanse. Just as he was about to give up his pursuit to continue his journey he saw a great teacher on the other side of the river. The young monk yelled over to the teacher, "Oh wise one, can you tell me how to get to the other side of this river?" The teacher ponders for a moment, looked up and down the river and yelled back, "My son, you are on the other side." Maybe the expanse we perceive between us and our Lord is not what it seems.

Maybe, just maybe, we just need to trust that Jesus will find a way across the waters. And when we trust in his power, instead of the fear of what surrounds us, when we put our hand in his outstretched hand, before we know it we may find despite the obstacles we once faced, in the light of the rising Son, that we already are on the other side.