

“ When the Wind is Against You”

Matthew 14: 22-33

August 16, 2020

A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

It has been a hot couple of weeks – it is, after all, August in North Carolina! So, in choosing the lectionary text for this morning’s scripture reading, I gravitated toward the story of the disciples who are caught in a storm on the Sea of Galilee. Apparently, storms are quick to appear on the Sea of Galilee and they can be quite violent because of the geographic location of the sea. We also know about violent and sudden storms here in NC. And we have been living through the storm named Covid 19 which appeared suddenly and violently about 6 months ago. There are hundreds of water stories in the Bible – most of them demonstrating the mighty power of God to save. Perhaps the writer of Matthew’s gospel intends for us to remember some of these stories involving water and God’s saving power. The infant Moses is saved when his Hebrew mother creates a basket of reeds and floats her baby down the river to safety, where the Pharaoh’s daughter plucks him out of danger. As an adult, Moses parts the Red Sea so the Hebrew people can cross over from slavery into the promised land. God saves Jonah from his rebellious self by sending a giant fish to

swallow him after sailors have tossed him into the ocean. Water can be a frightening, chaotic, unpredictable force of nature and, paradoxically, water can also be the median through which God brings forth new life.

There is a story from the Buddhist tradition about a disciple who thought he could improve his skills at divine enlightenment – which is the goal of Buddhism – by spending time in silence and apart from the world. So, he bid farewell to his brothers in the monastery, took the ferry across the river, and went to live in a cave high in the hills by himself. He meditated nonstop for twenty-five years. At the end of that time, he emerged from the cave, stretched his arms above his head like a man waking from a long sleep, and made his way down to the river.

Without even pausing to test the temperature of the water, he stepped out on top of the river and proceeded to walk across the water toward the monastery he had left a quarter of a century ago. Two monks were doing their laundry down by the river and looked up and saw him coming across the river toward them.

“Who is that?” one of the monks asked. The other replied “That is the old man who has spent twenty-five years meditating in a cave. Now look at him! He can even walk on water!”

“What a pity,” the first monk replied. “He spent 25 years learning how to walk on water? Why would he do that - the ferry only costs a quarter.”

The Christian tradition has its own water-walking story.

Prayer for Understanding:

Mighty God, whom we long to see by some powerful revelation or miraculous intervention, speak to us in a still small voice. We seek you on behalf of the multitudes who need your transforming power, but also for ourselves. Encourage us to take the next step in response to your summons. Reform our doubts, that faith may empower us. Amen.

Scripture Reading Matthew 14: 22-33

This morning’s scripture reading involves Peter as one of the main characters. I love Peter – sometimes he gets it and other times he’s clueless about who Jesus is and what Jesus came to do and teach. He is always passionate and outspoken, never a wall flower who fades into the background. Peter tries to meet Jesus out on a stormy Sea of Galilee. How crazy is that? To jump out into the middle of the sea during a thunder storm! Peter did not prepare for twenty-five years to walk on water as did our Buddhist monk. He did not practice at all, as far as anyone knows. He simply saw Jesus out on the water

and asked the Lord to command him to come – not to allow him, but to make him, so that Peter would have no further doubt about who Jesus was.

For most of the years of its telling, this story has been repeated as a story about faith and Peter, in the end, does not seem to have enough. He steps out on the water like an Olympic hopeful on the balance beam, laying each foot down on the water with a tremor. Then the wind gusts, he loses focus and down he goes, filling his snout with water while everyone in the boat watches helplessly.

If Peter had just kept his eyes on Jesus, maybe the outcome would have been different. If he had just had more faith, then his fear might not have sunk him. That is how I have always heard the story told. But I wonder..... Peter says a peculiar thing at the beginning of the story which makes me question his motives. Once Jesus has appeared on the sea, walking toward the disciples, and has assured them that it is indeed Jesus, their friend and traveling companion, Peter says: “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” He doubts that it is Jesus whom he sees with his own two eyes. He questions whether Jesus is who he says he is and demands proof of his identity, using the very same phrase the devil used when he tempted Jesus in the wilderness. “If you are the Son of God...” Do this thing, then this, then this.

It is not enough for Peter that Jesus is headed straight for the boat. Peter stops him before he gets there, putting himself out front as a kind of dare. “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” Make me do something extraordinary. Set me apart from the other disciples who are rowing furiously against the raging storm. Grant me exemption from the laws of nature which bind ordinary people and I will then believe you are who you say you are.

It is incredibly pompous of Peter to want to set himself apart or above the other disciples who are furiously rowing in the boat, but in this story as in most of the other embarrassing stories about Peter, he is speaking for us. Is there anyone among us who has never asked God for an exemption? Please God, suspend the rules just this once and make me know that you are always with me. Heal me, help me, talk to me out loud. Leave me no room to doubt you and I will believe.

We have all got a little bit of Peter in us, asking Jesus to prove himself by doing something spectacular for us. We want the burden of proof to be on him, not us. We want him to single us out for special treatment, to let us climb out of the boat and do a solo no one else gets to do.

I expect Jesus had to think a minute before he decided how to respond to Peter. He could have said, “Who do you think you are, Simon Peter? Sit back down and find your oar!” But that was not what Peter needed. What Peter

needed was a couple of steps on the water (to cure his doubt) and then a nose full of sea water (to cure his pomposity).

“Lord, save me!” Peter cried as he began to sink, which is how we know he got his question answered in the end. He was not in any doubt who Jesus was when the sea gave way beneath him. He knew that Jesus was the life saver. Jesus did not let him down, either. He reached out his hand, caught Peter, and threw him in the boat, saying, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

“You of little faith, why did you doubt?” Jesus was headed straight for the boat tossed about in the storm. If Peter would have just kept his seat for one more minute, Jesus would have been sitting right next to him and the other disciples, with no need for a circus stunt out on the water. (The ferry only costs a quarter.)

He only says that to Peter, by the way. There is no rebuke for the other disciples, who had faith enough to stay in the boat, hauling on the oars together until their Lord came to them. Only Peter left the boat and the community in order to fly solo – thinking, perhaps, that it would go down in history as a sign of great faith – never guessing that Jesus would call it the exact opposite

You decide. Maybe this really is a story about the church’s need for heroes – for people who, like Peter, are willing to risk their lives to prove that Jesus is who he says he is. But it may just as well be a story about the other

eleven disciples, who never thought of themselves as particularly heroic, who never dreamed of putting Jesus to the test, who were willing to row against the wind until he got into the boat with them, no matter how long it took. They trusted that God was always with them, even in the midst of life's storms.

They were not looking for exemptions. They were just looking for their Lord to join them where they were, and that was when the miracle happened – not while Jesus and Peter were out doing the fancy stuff on the water, but once Jesus had everyone back together in the boat.

That was when the wind ceased – just like that. And those in the boat worshipped him saying, “Truly, you are the Son of God.”

God has the power to bring peace and new life in the midst of any storm in which we find ourselves. Perhaps when we are tempted to do the fancy solo stuff out on the water, we would do well to remember that God comes to us as we are rowing in the boats with our brothers and sisters in community. Thanks be to God!