

“Walking through Chaos”
Psalm 85:8-13; Romans 10:5-15;
Matthew 14:22-33

August 9, 2020
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They come to the end of their time on the shore with those folks, and Jesus sends his disciples off across the lake in a boat by themselves while he goes up the mountain to pray. Perhaps he’s modeling here that need we have to pay attention to God, to be in conversation with God, and to be in relationship with God.

Maybe the disciples are describing something about what Jesus sometimes has all of us do—go on a journey that feels like it is without him. He sends us out. He sends us on a journey. He invites us to go to the other side—the other side of some event, some lake, some place, some time. Sometimes it doesn’t feel like he’s with us.

As these disciples go across the lake on this journey without Jesus, they run into the waves and the wind. Now there are some interesting things about the way these are described. The word that is translated “battered the boat” in the New Revised Standard Version. It says the waves battered the boat. It’s also the word for torture or torment. So, these waves tortured or tormented the boat.

The word for wind here is not the word that sometimes we hear used when wind and spirit are the same. This wind here is a different word. It’s a word that can also be the idea of false arguments, or false doctrines, or false ways of thinking. We sometimes say someone is a windbag because we feel they are saying things that aren’t real. They are just expressing a lot of stuff. It’s almost that way here. We have a sense that the wind is against them.

Now as I begin to talk about this event in this way, it might feel like perhaps I’m falling into simply making it into a metaphor. I want to suggest that sometimes we get so focused on the physicality of something, we’re so worried about Jesus defying gravity or the extra buoyancy of Jesus for some reason, that that’s what we focus on. According to one of the commentators I read, this is how he describes it: “Whereas the modern mind thinks of defying the law of gravity, the biblical mind thinks of the one who overcomes the power of chaos--walking on water as conquest; and the sea as the anti-creation chaos monster.” For in the time of Jesus the sea was a symbol or metaphor for chaos.

Sometimes I think we get so tied up with the physical forces that we feel like Jesus is overcoming, we don’t think about how it might be a description of other forces in our lives as well. The force of evil, for example. The force of chaos and what chaos does and creates. We have lots of forces in our lives that play on how we live our lives. We have social forces—ways of doing things that are expected of us. We have ways that our culture works, and we don’t give it a second thought. We are engaged with different institutions and how they influence our lives. We are engaged with a political system and how it influences our lives. There are all kinds of ways that external forces – not

physical forces, necessarily – are shaping us. And it feels to me like this is a particular time where the forces of chaos are evident. Around a virus that is changing how we can do things, that is leading to premature death of way too many, that's causing an illness in some that lingers for a long time, and it causes some divisions about whether it is worth paying attention to.

As we walk through this kind of chaos, there's a sense in which we are all in the same boat and this is a description of disciples being in the same boat. I think there might be something more to being in the same boat than just the circumstances around us. These disciples were in a boat together *because* they were disciples. I think it's a reminder that we as a church, as a family of faith, as a community of faith, that's a boat for us, and being in that boat can be incredibly important. It's a way to help us make it to the other side through the chaos, against those winds that are blowing against us. Even then, it's hard to do on our own.

So we have this description of Jesus coming, walking through the chaos, over the chaos, using the chaos as a path to get to the disciples. This is an unexpected event in their lives. They can't figure out why he is coming like this or what's even out there. God does come in unexpected ways, enters our lives in ways we don't expect. Perhaps in this time, as well, we will find God working in ways we don't expect. Jesus will walk into our lives in ways we don't quite expect.

As we, like the disciples, wonder about something else new, something else different, we can react out of fear. I think there's an invitation here to listen for Jesus reaching out to us, saying, "It is I. Do not be afraid." I know that there are times in my life right now when I particularly need to hear, to listen for Jesus in that way.

There is an interesting reaction to this by Peter. Some people suggest that we're all supposed to get out of the boat here. We should get out of the boat and join Jesus. But I don't see Jesus saying that. He doesn't say, "OK, everybody come join me!" He just says, "Do not be afraid." Peter says, "If you are Jesus, command me to come." Peter is testing Jesus. It's interesting Jesus simply says to Peter, "Come." He doesn't tell Peter, "You can come, but it's not going to be so much a test of me; it's going to turn into a test for you." He just says, "Come." Indeed, Peter with all boldness, thinking his faith is strong enough, jumps out of the boat and starts walking to Jesus. But as most of us, walking into that chaos against those winds, he starts vacillating. That's the word here. He actually starts vacillating. His faith struggles. He starts sinking. It's a sinking feeling that I recognize in the face of the chaos and the winds of change, and the winds of conspiracy. In the winds of the day, how easy it is to vacillate.

Peter knows, at least, what to do. He cries out, "Lord, save me!" And Jesus reaches out, takes his hand, and takes him back into the boat. They don't stay out in the wind and the waves. He takes him back into the boat. There are times I think we need to recognize that we are in the boat together. Our boat, in some ways, is our church. It is our family of faith. We need those times where we recognize we are together facing the wind and the waves, and that Jesus will walk through that chaos,

and we will have Jesus with us. And what does Jesus bring as they get into the boat? He brings peace. Peace among the chaos. Peace among those winds, those false arguments, those conspiracies, those winds that are against us. Sometimes we need that place of peace to help us journey across to the other side.

I think we are on a journey through chaos right now that I'm hoping will take us soon to the other side. Part of the question is what happens as we make it to the other side? It would be very easy for us in this circumstance and today's climate and situation to get to the other side and be at a place that falls apart, that simply is an event that denigrates into conflict, one against another. What happens when Jesus takes his disciples to the other side, he immediately does a healing. He takes them to a place of healing. I believe that as we are in the same boat together through this chaos we are to help bring that peace and that healing to the other side.

Jesus engages us and helps us know the grace and love of God for us, the peace that goes beyond all understanding, it's not just so we can have a nice journey. But that as we are able to get through the chaos and the winds, we come to a place where there can be healing. The grace can be shared. The goodness can blossom.

Sometimes we need to be in the same boat and to recognize that, and to recognize the peace and the encouragement and the ability it gives us to get to the other side. It is from that that we can bring the world a healing that comes from grace. Perhaps we can see ways to do that in our own lives as we hold onto one another, encourage and support one another through these times, recognizing we are in the same boat, knowing we need the grace and goodness of Jesus, and seeing as we come to the other side, as we enter into other folks' lives, that we have the opportunity to bring the healing of Christ with us, the peace of Christ that is among us.

We have this incredible gift of Jesus entering the boat with us, with any who want to get in the boat together, and we are called, then, to go to the other side and bring that healing as well. Amen.