

Lent 1 - Wandering Heart: "Rescue me from danger"

Matthew 14:22-33

A sermon preached by Zoom for Plymouth Presbyterian Church,

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I had flown into the Denver International Airport to do a family wedding in Buffalo Creek, Colorado. I was waiting to meet my oldest brother Robert and his fiancé Mary. I flew in from Portland, Oregon. They were flying in from Chicago, Illinois. We were to meet one other brother, Ted, flying in from Oakland, California. While I waited, I was reviewing the need to rent a car, drive to Golden, Colorado to get the wedding license, then to the hotel to check in, and finally to the wedding site late in the day to meet the rest of the family. To my shock, I didn't have cell numbers or flight information for any of them. I found myself saying, "I can't do this!" Perhaps, disciple Peter was saying the same thing when he was out of the boat in the storm. "I can't do this!"

This week I was reading, thinking, praying and working on this sermon – I heard Allison Krause's beautiful rendition of Keith Whitley's song, "*When You Say Nothing At All.*" Then thankfully, I couldn't help but get a mental picture of Simon Peter and his relationship with Jesus from this morning's Gospel reading.

There's a truth in your eyes
Sayin' you'll never leave me
The touch of your hand says
you'll catch me if ever I fall.

"Immediately Jesus stretched out his hand, took hold of him.... When they got up into the boat, the wind ceased," (Matt 14:31-32)

This story from Matthew tells us of Jesus' miracle of water walking – but the message it gives us is so much more. St. Augustine said that this story was an allegory for Jesus and the Church. He said that the Church was represented by the boat the disciples were in. That's an analogy often drawn – thus the reason the part of the church you're sitting in is called the nave, coming from the same root word as do "navy" and "navigate," and you'll notice that many church ceilings look like the upside down hull of a boat. So Augustine said that the Church may get thrown around by the storms and high seas of life – and he equated the devil with the power that keeps the storms blowing – but with Jesus' help the Church can weather whatever storm blows. I like that analogy, but I think the story of Peter's interaction with Jesus tells me something even more meaningful today.

As I've said before, Peter is sort of the perfect example for us with his wandering heart. He can show us faith in action. But he also shows us what NOT to do by virtue of his impetuosity followed by failure of faith. And every time, Peter says, "I can't do this!" Jesus takes him back and saves him from the world – and from himself.

This morning's story follows immediately after the feeding of the multitude. And remember that even *before* Jesus healed, preached, taught and fed that day, He was looking for a place to get away from the crowds; to rest and pray. So, after the crowds had been fed, Jesus sent the disciples in the boat to go across the Sea of Galilee and He stayed behind to go up on the mountain alone to pray.

The Sea of Galilee is about 8 miles across at its widest point. That's a pretty easy sail if the winds are right. But that night the sea and the wind were both working against the disciples. Matthew tells us that the disciples were "far from shore" and that it was "early morning" when Jesus approached the boat. Other versions of the Bible translate "early morning" as "the fourth watch," which would be between 3-6:00am. And In John's version of this story, he says the boat had travelled some 3-4 miles. (John 6:19 NRSV). So ... the disciples, who were tired *before* they got in the boat, have now spent most of the night trying to get 8 miles – and they've only made it halfway.

Let's try to put ourselves in that place for a minute. Two days earlier they had gotten news that John the Baptist had been executed by Herod. Andrew and John had been disciples of John the Baptist before they met Jesus. They loved John, as did his cousin, Jesus. They had not been able to mourn his passing because of the crowds that kept pressing in on them. They tried to get away by boat, but Jesus told them to put back in to shore because He had such compassion for the people. Then there was that incredible miracle of the feeding. Now they were emotionally spent and physically exhausted – and they found themselves stuck in the middle of the lake, in a crushing storm, too tired to fight the rest of the way across. And then they saw Him walking toward them – 3 miles from the shore – and they were petrified because in their state, they thought it was a ghost. But instead of cowering as the others did, their unofficial leader, Peter, stood up to get a better look.

Jesus, still walking toward them on top of the waves, said, "Cheer up! It is I! Don't be afraid." Just as a little aside here, this is one of those places where I think the NRSV messes up in its translation. It says that Jesus tells them, "It is I." Another translation for that phrase is "I Am." I love the image of Jesus saying, "Don't be afraid. I Am." Since "I Am," was the name that God gave when Moses asked, "Behold, when I come to the children of Israel, and tell them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you;' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' What should I tell them?" (Exodus 3:13). And when Peter hears his master's voice, he responds, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the waters."

I've got to tell you, in that place, at that time, I would not have said what Peter did. I don't know about you, but given the position the disciples were in, and knowing that they had seen Jesus still a storm before this (Matt 8:23), I think my response would have been, "Lord, if it is you, get us out of this!" But not Peter. He wanted to walk where Jesus walked – even on the water.

So Jesus calls Peter to him and Mr. Enthusiasm jumps out of the boat and starts walking in the Way of the Lord. But what happened to him next? Like his name, *petros* (or rock) he started to sink. Rocky is rescued from danger.

We are all very much like Peter in our day-to-day lives. We want so much to be disciples – those who devote their lives to learning from Jesus and trying to live as Jesus lived. We want to have the great faith on which Jesus could establish the Church – we want to be the cornerstones that Jesus told Peter he was. But like Peter, when we lose our concentration, when we take our eye off the ball, even for a moment, we sink. Isn't that true? I know it is of me. No matter how badly I want to be a great Christian, let some stumbling block get thrown into my way, and I'll look at it long enough to trip.

“Cheer up! It is I! Don't be afraid.” (Matthew 14:27). No matter how much we may lack in our ability to be good disciples, Jesus never gives up on us. Rocky-Peter, sank that early morning in the Sea of Galilee, but Jesus was there, hand out, at the ready, to grab him and rescue him from danger. The same is true of us.

The adventure of faith this week is outside the boat.

So crawl out of the boat.

Only when we find ourselves in places where we can't do it will we know Jesus' rescue!

Then we can sing “Jesus rescued me from danger!”

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

I believe in a God who moves toward me when storms rage.

I believe in a God who invites me to be brave.

I believe in a God whom the wind and waves obey.

I believe in a God who knows my name.

I believe in a God of love. I am not afraid.

Amen.