

Calm in the midst of a storm.

Genesis 37: 1-4, 12-28; Matthew 14: 22-23

There are many moments on the faith journey where we are suddenly because of a significant event that we have experienced has given us a glimpse of and provided some insight into the mission and identity of Jesus. It's a moment when we truly know that we are not alone and God the divine is with us. Today's scriptures provide us with comfort and encouragement while also challenging us at the same time. I wonder if you can think of a time in your life when your faith was tested. I wonder when you have stepped out in faith knowing full well that you were taking a risk and at the same time you knew you had to do it. I wonder what distracted you in that moment or caused you to stumble; what thought led you to doubt in your call or in your faith in God. I wonder what has been the dark night of your soul, as the mystics who have come before have written about. The passage from Matthew is rich with words of reassurance and hope.

This particular story of Jesus also occurs in Mark and John; however, Matthew's version gives us a fuller account with the dialogue between Jesus and Peter; Peter's attempt to walk on the water. Peter steps out boldly, leaves his comfort zone because he has faith or maybe just a little bit of faith, but the amount of faith doesn't matter. When Jesus calls Peter and says come he gets out of that boat, he doesn't hesitate, he acts. He steps out even in the face of fear. He steps out of that boat, out of the boat in faith and with faithfulness. As one theologian named Dock Hollingsworth, suggest "a little faith may be all that is needed to transform a story that starts in terror into a story that ends in worship."¹ Peter's willingness to act and trust in Jesus reminds us of how one person's risk can transform things for the whole community of faith. Peter's actions today remind us that "we are called to step out in faith amid troubled waters. We are to be faithful to the call of Christ stepping out in faith is not a guarantee that we will not face troubled waters or be filled with fear but it is always accompanied by the assurance that Jesus will not abandon us, that when we need it most he will extend his arm to lift us up get us back into the boat."²

¹ Dock Hollingsworth, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 3. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), p. 337.

² Clifton Kirkpatrick, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 3. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), p. 334.

What I find interesting about this story is that the disciples didn't fear the storm itself. As fishermen they would have been used to stormy seas as they were sailing and fishing. What frightened them was the appearance of this man walking on the water, the appearance of Jesus and at first, they don't recognize him. In Matthew's version they think he is a ghost what Jesus says in response to their fear reveals a lot to us about who Jesus is. Jesus says in that moment take heart it is I do not be afraid. It's amazing how much power is contained in three little words it is I. When Moses asked God to tell him who was sending him to free the Hebrew people God responded by saying tell them I am sent you. So in this story in this moment when Jesus walks across the water to the frightened disciples and says it is I Jesus is using the divine name to announce his presence I am here; it is I. The waves will not harm you in this moment. Jesus is identifying himself with God who is the liberator and redeemer of Israel, who is the Creator of the world, the one who can calm chaos and bring things to order. Jesus is revealing to the disciples that he is not only a shepherd, but also a liberator and redeemer; found in that phrase it is I. And he ends that statement with words that we have heard so much in the past months. Do not be afraid.

I believe that the story of Joseph today demonstrates how our trust in God as liberator and redeemer will give us the strength and the will to live through the storms of life, through the difficulties and challenges that we each face; that we face as a community and as a global world. Now there is no mention of God in the part of the story that we heard about Joseph and yet we know that Joseph will prevail in the end because of his faith in God; and Joseph, unlike Peter does not get distracted. Even when Joseph is betrayed by his half brothers out of their jealousy because their father favored him and gave him preferential treatment God protects Joseph. God gives Joseph compassion; compassion, and the action of Reuben one of his brothers who implores the other brothers not to draw blood and not to kill Joseph. As I said before stepping out in faith is not a guarantee that we will not face troubled waters. Joseph's life was spared but he was also thrown into a pit, he was sold into slavery, he would end up in jail.

Peter steps out in faith and in a split second loses his focus, he falters and starts to sink. One of the members of our congregation today in our scripture reflections group pointed out this week that they found comfort in the quick actions of Jesus. The word immediately is used not once, not twice, but three times in the short passage of Matthew. Jesus acts immediately, God acts immediately, and I would suggest that sometimes this action is so fast that we can fail to notice it. In that moment sometimes we have no idea how Jesus and God are reaching out just when we're faced with these storms in our lives, but they are there. The first time we heard this word immediately was when Jesus sent the disciples out immediately into the boat to go ahead of him to the other side. Now this allowed Jesus to dismiss the crowds that had gathered for the feeding of the 5000 and then Jesus goes off alone seeking solace, seeking comfort in the spiritual practice of prayer with God. What's interesting about this part of the story is that Jesus seeks comfort before the storm, not during and not in the storm and I think there is an important lesson in these actions by Jesus. All too often we reach out to God only when we find ourselves in the midst of

trouble; Jesus in his actions to pray and to reconnect with God before the storm remind us of the importance of Sabbath practices which we talked about a lot in June. It's the reminder that we need to be disciplined in our prayerful practices. Praying in times that are not stormy will help us not become distracted from our spiritual calling when the storms do come. These practices can bring us strength when suddenly faced with difficulties in life. The story continued in the morning, Jesus sees that the boat has gone off course during the storms of the night, he goes to them, walks on the sea which terrifies the disciples and immediately Jesus speaks and tells them take heart it is I do not be afraid. Jesus is encouraging in this moment and then at the end of the passage when Peter suddenly notices the wind then becomes frightened again after he has left the safety of that boat Jesus immediately reaches out his hand and saves Peter and that's when the sea is calmed. in this moment Jesus then challenges Peter and the disciples and says you of little faith why did you doubt? Now this can be read in a variety of ways; you of little faith why did you doubt or a little more playful you have little faith why did you doubt? Either way it is a simple fact that no matter what, Jesus was going to help Peter.

William Willemon who is a famous preacher wrote a sermon entitled, "How will you know if it's Jesus?" And in that sermon he asked the following: "If Peter had not ventured forth had not obeyed the call to walk on water and Peter would never have had this great opportunity for recognizing Jesus and being rescued by Jesus. I wonder if too many of us are merely splashing about in the safe shallows and therefore have too few opportunities to test and deepen our faith. The story today implies if you want to be close to Jesus you must venture forth out on the sea. You must prove his promises through trusting his promises, through risk and venture"³ in this time apart. I think our faith has been tested, continues to be tested; our faith in each other, faith in God or faith in humanity. But as I look out at this beautiful sanctuary as I think about Robertson-Wesley's building, when I think about all the people who have come before and the ones who will come after, Robertson-Wesley isn't simply splashing around in the shallows Robertson-Wesley is taking risks; that's how the tradition started. They took a risk by building on the edge of the city without knowing whether they had the resources to pay for the building that they had built. Would the people come and worship here? Would this place be filled? And here we are still standing; maybe not physically together in this moment, but Robertson-Wesley is out in this community reaching out to those in need, being a safe haven of presence for many who are lost, alone and afraid in the stormy time of Covid. Are you willing to step out of the boat and go where Jesus leads us and know that even if we are distracted by something that Jesus will reach out help us get to where we need to go? Are we able to hold on to our faith like Joseph and even in times of separation find ways to affect change in this world and in the lives of individuals?

My question today for you is how will Jesus calm the storm that we find ourselves in today? Know that Jesus is walking across that water and calling out to all of us to come, to have faith, to

³ William Willemon, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 3. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011, p. 336..

take a risk and to help to be part of the liberation and redeeming power of Jesus in this world. All it takes is a little bit of faith for a whole community to be transformed. Imagine if all of us have just a little bit of faith. I hope they go out this day in faith stand strong do not be afraid and take heart. Thanks be to God.