

August 13, 2017
Romans 10:5-15
Matthew 14:22-33

Battered by the Waves

Finally, finally Jesus has gotten some time for himself. In our story today, Jesus finally gets some alone time up in the mountains where he can just be quiet with God. And we know Jesus really needed it. He had had a long day. He had had a long couple of months, actually, with all the crowds following him wherever he went. Swarming him. Swamping him. Overwhelming him with demands. They wanted more and more from him it seemed. And when Jesus tried to get away to what he thought was a deserted place, the crowd still tracked him down. And the day off that Jesus hoped to have, turned into a day of feeding 5000 people. But now, finally, Jesus gets some time. And he dismisses the crowds. He dismisses the disciples. Sometimes care-givers just need to do that, don't they? They just need time off.

Jesus went to the mountain to be alone with God. And he sent his disciples on ahead to the other side of the lake. Jesus always seemed to be doing that, going with his disciples to the other side of somewhere. Going from the Jewish side to the other Gentile side. From our side to

their side. Going from the familiar side to the other unfamiliar side. As if being on one side of the lake wasn't an option. As if staying on one side was not a choice. Jesus was always going over there to those people in other places. And he gets his disciples to do the same thing, to go from those they know to those they don't know. And in our story today, Jesus has sent his disciples on ahead to the other side yet again. And I have to wonder, what that means for us? What other side might Jesus be sending us to today?

But the disciples then must have understood what Jesus meant and where they were to go. They must have been used to crossing from one side of the lake to the other, from these people to those people, from Jew to Gentile, from us to them, and back again. The disciples must have been familiar with that voyage across the lake. And it started out just fine. But then their journey stalled. And their boat was held up. The wind was pushing against them. The water was rough and dangerous. The weather had turned.

It says in our reading that their boat was being battered by waves. The Greek word for battered, *basanizo*, means tortured or tormented. And the

wind, it says, is against them. The Greek word for against, enantios, is about opposition and hostility. It's not just that the wind is against them, it is opposed to them. It is an adversary fighting them, pushing them back, keeping them from getting where they want to go. The disciples in their boat are getting nowhere. Because powerful things are against them.

Sometimes it might feel that way for us too. It might feel that way for our faith, for our church. It might feel like we are in our little boat together. Headed to the other side, doing what Jesus asked us to do. But we don't seem to be getting anywhere. We don't seem to be getting to the other side. We are out in the middle of tumultuous waters with the wind pushing us around. And the waves crashing into us. We can't get anywhere. Everything is against us. It feels that way sometimes. The egos at work are against us. The schedules at school are against us. The people who put the bread on the one side of the grocery store and the milk on the other, they are against us. The politicians are against us. Our 'friends' are against us. Our family members are against us. We are even against ourselves, battered by our own doubts and jealousies and

resentments. And Jesus, Jesus is nowhere to be found. He is off having some quiet time somewhere and we are on our own. And we are anxious and afraid that we will soon be sunk by these forces that are against us. The disciples in the gospel are facing hostile winds and threatening waves and we can understand their fear in this situation. But for those in Jesus' time this scene would mean something more horrible. It would have struck a deeper chord about the terrible threat of chaotic flood waters. They would have remembered the waters of creation. And how God had to separate and take control of their chaos to create life. How in Noah's time, the chaotic flood waters overtook the world. And these fishermen who were on the water every day, they knew that this water had the power to overwhelm them and drown them all.

The disciples were in their boat far from shore. And the waves were battering them. And the wind was against them. And Jesus were nowhere to be found. The disciples were on their own and they couldn't get anywhere. They were frustrated and afraid. Just as we are afraid that we might be stuck. As a church. Sometimes we feel powerless. That whatever Jesus wants us to do, we aren't doing it. Wherever Jesus has

sent us, we can't seem to get there. With all the things opposing us and working against us. And this little boat we are in together, it's no picnic. It's the same frustrations about the same things with the same people. And if it weren't for the crashing waves and the howling wind, we might just jump ship. But this boat that we are in together, we are in it together. It's all we've got, in this chaotic world.

The disciples in our story are straining hard against the wind and the waves. They are tired and frustrated as the night wears on. They are feeling helpless. And where is Jesus? And then they see something coming towards them on the water. "What is that? I don't know. It is a ghost? I hope not. Is it coming to get us??" And fear they feel already compounds. Because when you feel threatened, everything looks like a threat. Everyone looks like a threat. Even Jesus looks like a threatening ghost. Even Jesus who is coming to us in our stormy situation can look like someone coming to get us.

This week, Zeb Henry started 1st grade. And there have been a lot of emotions in our house. A lot of anxiety. Mostly from me. Even though we know how school goes. And we know the routine and we know the

wonderful staff at Northside. I still felt nervous and afraid. Because I can't stop myself, as a parent. I can't help it; I live in fear of something happening. Something beyond my control. Something like bullying or peer pressure or someone ruining his innocence. And the world around me, the conversations in the news and social media, they don't help. They only amplify the fear. That fear that we all tend to have, I think. The fear that everything and everyone is really against us. I think of those poor disciples in that boat in those unfriendly waters. Tossed around by the waves. Feeling like the wind was literally against them. They felt attacked, and when they saw Jesus coming to them walking on the waters, they were afraid of him. And Jesus knows how we are with fear. He knows how threatening life can feel. So immediately, Jesus says to his disciples. "Take heart. It's ME. DO NOT BE AFRAID." It's me, Jesus says. And he uses a phrase in Greek, Ego eimi. Which means I am. It's me, myself. And listen to this, it's the same phrase God uses in the Hebrew scriptures. When Moses asks at the burning bush, Who are you, Lord? Who should I say is sending me to demand the release of Pharaoh's slaves? God says. My name is Ego

eimi. It's me. Myself. The I AM is the one who sets captives free and delivers them through chaotic waters in the Red Sea. It's me. Ego eimi. I AM.

“Do not be afraid, says Jesus. Ego Eimi. It's me. The I Am. I'm not a ghost. And I'm not here to get you. I'm not here to let you sink. I won't let the wind or the water or any other force take you down. I'm here to get you to the other side. Have courage. It's me. Don't be afraid.”

It's Jesus. He comes to join the disciples in their little boat. But Peter, bless his heart, is always the one who has to say something. He always speaks up when the others are afraid. Because Peter doesn't want to be a fool. He doesn't want to seem weak or cowardly to others. He is afraid of looking like less than a leader. Especially since he has been struggling in that boat all night, struggling to stay afloat with the other disciples. “If it IS you,” Peter says. “If it is you, invite me out to join you on the water.” Now some say that this is about Peter's faith. It's about Peter getting out of the boat and taking a risk. But I don't think Jesus needs us to get out of the boat so much as Jesus needs us to get to the other side together. This is about Peter trying to impress his friends. This is about

Peter trying to look tough and brave and powerful. Because he's afraid of looking powerless to others. And how often do we do the same? How often do we let fear make our decisions? Fear that we aren't cool? Fear that we aren't impressive? Fear that we aren't successful like other families or other churches?

Peter was afraid of what others would think of him. He was afraid of looking weak. Of not measuring up. And not measuring up for Jesus. But it's not what Peter does that is the point of the story. It's not his actions that calm the wind and waves. And it's not what we do, but who we trust. Faith is not faith in us. It's faith in God. It's about Jesus who calms the wind and waves. It's about Jesus who humors our bravado and lets us try to walk on water. It's about Jesus who scoops us up when we sink. It's about Jesus who gets in the boat with us. Who gets into the boat that we are in together and takes us to the other side.

The other day, we were walking downtown and a few young boys were riding their bikes around, showing off for each other. One of them crossed the road and popped a wheelie. Then the other one of course, had to do it too. And he totally wiped out. And I did not shout in surprise

or make a big deal, because he was, you know, a boy. So I went over and asked calmly, Are you OK? “Yeah, yeah, I’m fine.” Are you sure? Is your bike OK? “Yeah, it’s good. I’m good. The chain’s messed up though. But it’s OK.” How’s your leg?, I asked. That was a pretty big spill you took. I was trying to put the chain back on and I could see he was trying to hold back the tears, trying to be tough, and I said, That was kind of scary, wasn’t it? “Yeah.” His voice quavered a little. Do you want to sit down for a minute? “No, I’m alright. I’m OK.” He took a deep breath. And then he got up and went on his way with his friend.

The world can seem pretty chaotic. And it can seem like everything is against us. And we are afraid. Afraid of what will happen. Afraid of the things beyond our control pushing and pulling at us. Afraid of what our friends will think of us. Afraid of what everyone will think of our little family, our little lives, our little church. Afraid we can’t meet all those expectations out there for our lives. But we are making this trip to the other side in our little boat here, and all we have to do is keep going. Just keep being faithful. Just keep trying to do what Jesus asks; to seek justice and practice mercy and love our neighbor even if they are an

enemy and point our boat, our community here, to the other side.

Because the Great I Am is with us. And the wind and the waves obey him. And he will get us there. Do not be afraid. Have courage. God is with us.