

Matthew 14: 22-33 All in the Same Boat

The Gospel reading this morning is a story familiar to many of you. But this morning, I invite you to try to set aside what you think you know about the story. Try to forget what you think you know that's going to happen, and why. Don't even think about "the lesson" you think you know that's there, so you can hear the story with fresh ears and an open heart. Follow Matthew's every word describing what is actually happening and let him take you there, to be with the disciples.

(read the pericope)

This passage picks up right where we left off last week. A quick recap. On the shore of Galilee, Jesus was met with a great crowd who had followed him to a deserted place and moved by compassion, he healed those who were sick. And when it was getting late in the evening, he took the little food there was, blessed it and gave it to the disciples to share with the crowd. And there was more than enough in the end. This is where today's story begins.

But first, let's remember that, to meet the needs of the great crowd, Jesus had set aside his own needs; he was feeling the need to be by himself and that's why he had gotten on a boat to begin with, to get away from the crowd, and his disciples, to be alone. So now, as soon as the people were fed, Jesus gathered his disciples and put them all in the boat to go ahead of him to the other side.

With the crowds and disciples gone, Jesus could finally go to the mountain by himself... to pray. He needed to be alone with God, to reconnect to the source of his power and recharge before he continued doing the loving and saving acts of God.

When he has had his time with God, Jesus goes to join the disciples in the boat, which is by now being tossed about in the rough sea, and he goes there, walking. Our modern minds cannot help but ask "how could that be?" "Did he really walk on the water?" But that's not the kind of questions the original readers of Matthew's gospel were concerned about. In the minds of those immersed in the biblical tradition, the early church, the power over the chaos of water belonged only to God. We need only to recall the water at the time of creation, the flood from which Noah's ark was saved, the Red Sea God parted to let the Israelites cross and then swallowed up the Egyptians... only the ruler of creation could do that. Only God walks on the water. That's what they would have understood and that's the message Matthew wants us to hear.

When Jesus sees that the disciples are terrified and doesn't recognize him, he says to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." And he says it using "God's voice." How is it God's voice? Jesus said *ego eimi*, which in Greek simply means "I AM," In a smoother English, you'd say "It is I" or "it's me!" In the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, when God spoke to Moses from the burning bush, *ego eimi* were the words God used when Moses asked for God's name. "*Ego eimi*, It is I," says Jesus who had just spent time with God in prayer. "*Ego eimi*, It is I, do not be afraid," Jesus says to the frightened disciples and is coming to join them in their boat, walking over troubled water. Jesus is the one who makes God present to us, in the midst of the storm. Take heart, *ego eimi*, do not be afraid.

Then something curious happens. Having heard Jesus say, "It is I," Peter calls out to Jesus, "IF IT IS YOU." "IF IT IS YOU, command me to come to you on the water." Now I wonder how this sounded to you. Did you hear it as an expression of Peter's genuine desire to come close to Jesus, rather than waiting for him to get to the boat. Or, maybe you heard it as a sign of Peter's courage, that he is willing to defy the gusty winds and step into the troubled water when the rest of the crew are staying in the boat, afraid.

But there is another possibility that the Scripture itself puts forward. This episode involving Peter is only in Matthew's Gospel, and we have heard Matthew tell of another time where someone else asked questions of Jesus in a similar way.

About 10 chapters earlier, Jesus had gone out to a deserted place by himself to be tempted by the devil.

The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' Jesus, who would later feed 5000 people with 5 loaves of bread, replies to the devil saying, one does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes out of the mouth of God. The devil then took him to the top of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, "God will command the angels and, on their hands, they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." Jesus said to the devil, 'Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

Peter said, "If it is you, command me to come to you on the water." What is going on here? Is he testing Jesus about what he said of himself, *ego eimi*, I AM. In the wilderness, Jesus refused to play the game of dare with the devil, when the devil said to him "IF YOU ARE the SON OF GOD..." When Peter said to him "IF IT IS YOU," Jesus says, "Okay, COME."

And now the table is turned, and Peter is the one being tested, and you heard what happened. Out on the roaring sea, shaken by the wind, Peter becomes afraid and begins to sink, and calls out to Jesus “Lord, help me!” Jesus helps him, and putting him back in the boat, says “you of little faith. Why did you doubt?”

But doubt what? Did he mean if only Peter had more faith, if only his faith were stronger, he would have kept walking on the water? Was Peter’s faith too little and that’s why he couldn’t. No, Jesus is not talking about that kind of faith; to the minds well familiar with the biblical stories, walking on the water or having power over water is a sign of divinity; only God can do that.

“Why did you doubt? You of little faith.” Then Jesus puts Peter back in the boat, not on the water to walk back to the boat hand in hand. Then Jesus gets in the boat with them and now that they are all in the boat together with Jesus, the wind calms down. And I can almost hear Peter protesting “But Lord, you were supposed to let me come to you walking on the water!” as if Jesus failed him. No, Peter. You were supposed to stay in the boat. You see, Peter’s doubt had started BEFORE leaving the boat. Jesus is not talking about Peter’s lack of faith that made him afraid and sink once he was on the water.

“You of little faith. Why did you doubt and leave the boat? Why did you have to test me? I had put you all together in the boat, so you are together as you crossed the rough sea, and I was coming to you.” What was required was the faith that let them remain in the boat, together, to face the danger together, be there for one another, and work together as they navigated the rough sea.

All in the same boat: It’s a phrase that was started to be used only in the mid-1800s, mainly by the Greeks to refer to the risks faced by the passengers in a small boat at sea. I wondered whoever came up with it had this story about the life of discipleship in mind.

This story is not a parable, but a glimpse in the life of the disciples out in the world. For the early church, their world was like a sea, and their little church was like a boat being tossed about by the strong wind that was against them. It was Jesus, who had put them in the boat. And the saving grace is, it is on this Peter, of little faith, who could not stay in the boat with others, that Jesus says he would build his church. Peter, who needed a proof that Jesus was who he said he was, “ego eimi,” becomes a living proof himself that that the church is not made up of perfect

disciples but filled with those who try to be faithful even as we make mistakes. There is hope for all of us, that God can use us in the church.

When the storm of life comes to us, when a calamity hits us, Jesus does not test our faith to see if it's strong enough to survive the trial, whether it is a rock splitting wind, an earthquake or fire, or depression or addiction or life-threatening illness. No, Jesus puts us in the boat, so together we can ride it out. The faith we need to have is not the faith in our own strength to fight off what threatens us, but the faith that trusts in the one who comes to us through the stormy sea and gets into the boat with us.

As a church, we share with one another and lift up to God many prayers for healing. When we do that, we are not just asking for cure, but we are riding in the boat of someone's rough sea together. We are being the church.

As a church, we respond to the disasters and the lives turned upside down in faraway corners of the world, we join in the boat together. And Jesus is with us, in the boat, for always.