

Riverside United Church
February 25, 2024

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 14: 22-33

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking towards them on the lake. But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified, saying, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.'

Peter answered him, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.' He said, 'Come.' So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came towards Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!' Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?' When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'

Prayer of Illumination:

God of Life, may the words of my mouth,
and the meditations of all our minds and hearts,
lead us to deeper understanding of you,
and the love you call us to live. Amen.

"Wandering Heart: #2 - Rescue Me From Danger?"

In the summer of 1984 - almost 40 years ago - I was serving as a summer ministry intern in the eastern part of Guysborough County of Nova Scotia. (Yes, I imagine you are doing the math - I was young!). One of the five communities that was part of that pastoral charge was Canso. Canso was a fishing community and each summer the community held a Fisherman's Memorial Service and I took part in the service that summer. It was held at the monument in the centre of town which stood as a Memorial to all those fishermen who had been lost at sea over the years. It was an important service in the life of and for the soul of that community. It was a service that honoured the accumulated grief and recognized the humility it takes to live by and work on the sea.

I had not thought of that experience for a long time, but the memory came back on Tuesday morning when the scripture exploration group gathered to discuss this story of Peter walking out on the water to meet Jesus.

Today, we continue our time with Peter as we figure out faith with this disciple. We are using a series of resources for Lent and a couple of weeks of Easter that tell the stories of Peter with the overarching theme of A Wandering Heart. Peter is a disciple whose faithfulness wanders around as he seeks to comprehend what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. And that may be where we find ourselves in the story because being a follower of Jesus does not come with a clear how to be manual or instruction booklet. We hear stories, we experience the example of others, we wrestle with our questions, we face the pressure of other values and priorities, we hear a variety of messages of what it means to be Christian, what it means to be faithful - because there is great variety in how Jesus is followed.

One of the symbols for the Christian church is a boat on storm tossed waters and one of the gospel stories that inspires this image is the reading we heard today. The disciples - many of whom had a background in

fishing - are sending some time away from the crowds - the feeding of the 5000 precedes this story - and the Sea of Galilee becomes rough as the winds pick up. The disciples look and see a figure coming across the water and their first reaction is that it must be a ghost. It then becomes clear that it is Jesus.

This story is included in three gospels - Matthew, Mark and John - and yet it is only Matthew that offers the intriguing response of Peter. Peter gets out of the boat and starts walking towards Jesus and when fear overcomes him, he begins to sink into the water and Jesus reaches out to save him, to rescue him.

What was Peter thinking? In our discussion on Tuesday morning, the comment was made that this was a pretty foolish thing to do - especially for a fisherman who would have known the power of the sea. It was in this conversation that I remembered the Fisherman's memorial service in Canso and I wondered if this would ever be a passage to read or reflect on at that service.

And we talked about the courage of Peter to walk out on the water to meet Jesus. Can courage and foolishness co-exist? Does it depend on one's perspective? The missing voices in this story are the rest of the disciples in the boat. I wonder what they were thinking?

The lenten series is using phrases from the hymn Come O Fount of Every Blessing, for this series. The creators of the series say that it is as if Peter wrote these lyrics. One of the lines is: "Let that grace now, like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to you." The phrase of the hymn for today's reading is "rescue me from danger."

I have really been struggling with the word "rescue" in terms of understanding of faith and connection with God. Maybe I am taking it too literally. Maybe I am stuck on dramatic images of rescue. Maybe I am reluctant to give up a sense of personal agency or power. Maybe I have a lot of questions about how God intervenes in our lives - and why doesn't God intervene more, rescue everyone.

I realize that I hear the story from a perspective of living with privilege and comfort and so my sense of risk, of faith, of rescue, of danger may be very different from someone else's perspective or need.

I don't think this would be a great biblical story for the Canso Fisherman's Memorial service because I would be cautious about the unintended message that it might send about who wasn't rescued from danger. The dynamic between faith and fear that is conveyed in this story can become over simplified into a message that those who drowned didn't have enough faith or that God was punishing them or that if they had really been worthy, God would have rescued them.

And that is a message that needs to be challenged in any way that it can because it is so prevalent in judgmental approaches of faith. And it is not just in rough waters at sea that such a message can be might be conveyed or heard, but also into the rough waters of illness, of grief, of wrestling with identity or living with too many forms of abuse or discrimination. The events and circumstances of our lives are not scripted by God to allocate Holy blessing or curse.

Within the scripts, choices and experiences of our lives we are invited to remember that we are not alone. We are invited to recognize the ways and the moments when love, grace, trust enable us to find our way. And there may be moments when we feel powerless or afraid and we find a way beyond danger or fear.

Peter's wandering heart was still learning to trust and so yes he was probably both foolish and courageous in this story and that may be a reminder that sometimes those two qualities can coexist and that may be one of the lessons of faith.

Learning and growing as a disciple, deepening our sense of being fully human, often takes a lifetime to nurture. Developing a faith memory and perspective can be slow to develop. As we think of this gospel story, the disciples by this point had seen Jesus offer healing to many, they had seen the waters calmed amidst a storm at least one other time. They had just participated in the miracle of the feeding of 5000 with 5 loaves of bread and two fish. And yet there were still trying to figure out who this Jesus was. So, when they see a figure walking toward them, their first thought was that it was a ghost.

We talk about having muscle memory in our bodies where we have learned how to do something. In our souls, it is important to develop a faith memory, so that we can recognize the wonder, the gift, the grace, the presence of the Holy in our midst. Peter recognized his limits - he was still learning that faith is not doing the impossible by oneself, but remembering that Holy Energy can be at work to do what may seem impossible but becomes possible. We also are reminded in this story to not be afraid - because fear can paralyze us into not taking any risk, not discovering how courage and foolishness can be dimensions of faith.

Another hesitation I have about this phrase “rescue me from danger” is the word me and the potential limit that places on the vision of faithfulness. While personal faith is vital it is only the means to a greater sense of purpose and call. In a world of great selfish focus and not a lot of broad or deep vision, then maybe the boat on storm tossed waters image of the church needs to imagine how we can be equipped to step out into those waters.

This image of “walking on water” is used to speak of risk and faith. One song I know written by Ken Powers and Diane Taylor, offers the words: “Walk on the water, cast away fear. Share in the miracle live for the day”. Gordon Light, in his song, My Love Colours outside the lines, says “We’ll never walk on the water if we’re not prepared to drown, body and soul, need a soaking from time to time...”

These songs offer the impression that the danger is staying in the boat, living with the status quo, not following the dream, not reaching out to encounter the Holy, not risking compassion or hope or justice, not reaching out to imagine how the waters can be calmed.

There are a lot of storms in our world. There are a lot of needs and hurts in our world and it can be overwhelming to imagine anything different, but maybe it is time for faith leadership to find ways to bring people together, to invite deeper conversation, to channel the instincts of compassion and hope into ways that name this accumulated grief and to recognize the humility that it takes to live and be in this world.

Maybe we do need to be rescued from the danger of ignoring what we see and not having the courage to find ways to respond. And may Jesus reach out to us walk with us and help us to learn to colour outside the lines! Amen.