

“He Came Toward Them”

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Matthew 14:22-33

The story of Jesus walking on water is recorded in all four gospels. *Why do you think this is such an important story that all four gospels include it?*

²²Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. ²⁷But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” ²⁸Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” ²⁹He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” ³¹Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” ³²When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.” ***The Word of the Lord....Thanks be to God!***

The disciples were exhausted....Jesus was exhausted. They had been working long hours, crowds were swarming them, they had just fed the 5,000 and they needed a break. So Jesus *immediately* sends his disciples on a cruise across the lake while he took some precious moments to enjoy alone time with God on the mountain.

The cruise didn't turn out the way the disciples had hoped. It was anything but smooth sailing. In the middle of the night they began to be pummeled by winds and battered by waves. Hard knocks at sea!

At this point, in the story, we read, “*Jesus came walking toward them on the sea.*” My guess is that Jesus walking on water grabs the attention of most. We are tempted to debate whether or not Jesus actually walked on water and, if so, how did he do it? But to me, focusing on walking on the water is missing the point. The real questions are not “*did Jesus walk on water*” and “*how did he do it?*” but “*what does it mean.*” What did it mean to the disciples in the boat and what does it mean to the disciples in these chairs/pews today.

A storm came up at just the wrong time. Just when the disciples were beginning to enjoy their get-away cruise.....just when they were beginning to relax.....just when they were beginning to laugh and let their hair down anticipating stress free sailing, storm clouds appeared out of nowhere, the rain came and the winds blew away any thought of respite.

Have you ever experienced something similar? Life was going along quite nicely, maybe not perfectly but certainly very manageably. You were feeling good and were filled with confidence but suddenly a tempest turns everything upside down. A storm that comes in the form of unemployment, a negative biopsy report, an accident, a debilitating illness, a broken relationship or _____ you fill in the blank with your own storm.

When we look at the big picture we see only dark clouds on the horizon. Our own government squabbles and almost defaults on its debt....the stock market falls off a cliff.....children are starving in Somalia.....a US helicopter is shot down, 30 US servicemen die and the war goes on and on and we look to the horizon but are hard pressed to spot rays of hope anywhere. It feels like there is a pall draped over our country and the world and this only exacerbates our personal storms. But this story is not about the storm....the storm is only a backdrop!

Jesus came to them! It was good news on the Sea of Galilee and it is good news for us this morning. It doesn't matter how he came to them but it matters that he came....and met them at the point of their greatest need.

The disciples weren't even looking for him. They were simply struggling to keep their boat afloat. But Jesus came, walking toward them. Even then the disciples still didn't recognize him but, in stead, mistook him for a ghost which filled them with more fear. But Jesus calls to them, "***Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.***"

Jesus didn't take them out of the storm nor did he stop the storm. He simply came alongside them in the storm and his presence gave them courage to face the storm.

Jesus' presence with his disciples on the water emboldened Peter who cried out, "***Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.***" To me Peter represents something very positive. It is as if Peter finally gets what it means to be a risk taking follower of Christ. He seems to be the only one in the boat who has a mustard seed of faith that recognizes that, with God's power, we can do what God does. Peter represents the kind of disciple most of us desire to be and have, indeed, been on occasion.....a person who gets out of the safety of the boat in the middle of a storm to do something that will be accomplished only by God's power, mercy and faithfulness.

Jesus hears Peter's request and he simply invites Peter, "***come.***" Thank you, Peter, for giving us a model of one who is willing to get out of the boat. Does he succeed? Does he walk on water? Yes, for a while *until* he takes his eyes off of Jesus and begins to focus on the size and ferocity of the waves. Then he begins to sink and, again, thank you, Peter, for praying one of the very best prayers anyone can utter. "***Lord, save me!***" "***Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him.***" And when Peter and Jesus were safely in the boat and the storm quieted, the disciples saw Jesus with new eyes. "***And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'***"

Some may not be facing storms this morning. No doubt you come with grateful hearts! Many are facing storms this morning....some are obvious and known by others but some are known only to you. Hidden struggles! Hidden hurts! My friends, the overarching story of the Bible is that God comes to us in the midst of the struggle. God especially comes in the person of Jesus Christ....the incarnation of God. Today's good news is another reminder that God does not abandon us to the wiles of the storm but is present with us.

Sometimes Jesus comes in the form of a family member or a friend or a random phone call or card or a billboard sign or scene on TV or a sunset or that inner nudge we call the "still small voice." Our temptation is to allow the crashing waves and pounding wind to prevent us from seeing and receiving the life-giving presence of Jesus Christ who has promised, "***I am with you always.***" Always!!

So here we gather in worship where we have heard the story of grace, hope and love once again and here we are gathered in worship to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion which is the visible word of the same story. "***For God so loved you that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.***" And remember, because Jesus comes to you, that life begins today!

Amen