

1 Kings 19:9-18, Psalm 85:8-13
Romans 10:5-15, Matthew 14:22-33

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

While a waitress during the summer before I entered college, I was taught from a more experienced waitress that when carrying filled cups of coffee, you should not look at the cups of coffee; you should instead look at the place you are going, the people you are serving. If you look at the cups of coffee, you'll start noticing the wobble and you will attempt to compensate for the wobble and invariably hot coffee is going to splash all over the place. Now if you feel a need to prove or disprove this theory (there's always someone out there who sees this as some kind of challenge), you can try it out during coffee hour following the service, but do not blame me if there are new stains on the Gathering Space carpet. And like the old Mission Impossible opening on TV, I will disavow any knowledge of your actions.

The point is when you focus on the wobble, things begin to fall apart. Look at Peter in our Gospel lesson. He's the over-confident and positive type; he'd probably try to carry four cups of coffee. So there he is, he's okay walking on the water - as long as he focuses on looking at Jesus. But when he begins to notice the wind, that's how Matthew puts it - when he gets involved in looking at the wobble, that's how I would put it - and tries to compensate for the wobble, he suddenly realizes he's out of the relative safety of the boat, he's in the midst of the storm on the water, and his attempt to compensate for the wobble aren't helping him at all. In fact, the more he tries, the more he's threatened to go under. But when Peter focuses on the wrong thing - not the Lord Jesus but the intensity of the storm - he's afraid and he begins to sink. It is Jesus who reaches out and takes his hand and lifts him up.

I said that Peter was outside of the relative safety of the boat, and I meant that it was all relative, because the disciples who remained in the boat in the midst of the storm and in the dark are terrified as well, and their story needs to be told. The story of Peter's walk on the water and his near drowning in the Sea of Galilee is but one small story out of a host of stories in scripture which all tell basically the same thing - about the people of God, the people that God has created, the storms in their lives that threaten to undo them, and the presence of this God who will be with them in those storms and who will help them get through those storms.

I have sympathy for those disciples in that little boat. I would not want to be in a little boat, in the midst of rough waves, in the dark. When my family and I were vacationing in Ocean City, Maryland a few weeks ago, I was able to witness something like that. My husband Randy and I were sitting on the balcony which overlooked the beach. It was dark, but there was a full moon and there was enough hotel light from the windows to shed some visibility on the scene. We could see some people walking on the beach, and we could see a group of fishermen who had taken out their deep-sea fishing poles and had set them up in the sand. One of those young fishermen also brought along what amounted to an open kayak. It wasn't enclosed but was about the size of a kayak and had double ears. He got in that little boat and rowed straight out. I thought the guy was crazy, and he kept on going until he was just a dot on the ocean and then, in the little bit of visibility, I could see the boat turn and could see the double ear going and he came all the way back. And I finally exhaled. And then he went and did it again! He went all the way out there until I could barely see him, and then he came back. And I was glad when he decided to stay put and resume his fishing.

Now our disciples had been safely on the land, just like that fisherman finally decided to be on the one side of the Sea of Galilee (that's where last week's lesson ended). It was when Jesus had fed the multitude, the five thousand people who were hungry. That had been another opportunity for the disciples to see that Jesus was someone they could rely on in a pinch. There were five thousand plus people, the disciples didn't have much in the way of food (five loaves of bread, two fish), and so they had come to rely on Jesus. But after this miraculous feeding, Jesus as much as said to them, "You disciples, just go on ahead, I'll catch up with you later." So there they are. Imagine those disciples—in the dark, in a little boat, on the rough seas. When my husband and I toured Israel in 1990 and we were on a boat on the Sea of Galilee, our tour guide told us that storms brew up without warning (now why he told us that while we were out in the middle of the Sea, I don't know! I did not appreciate that!). But he said that it is not uncommon for storms to surprise fishermen on the Sea of Galilee.

So here's this ferocious storm. And remember—the Jesus they have come to rely on is not with them, they rely on themselves—and what do they focus on? They're not focusing on Jesus, they're focusing on the wave action, and the wind. And they're terrified. And even when Jesus makes his presence known, they're so afraid they don't recognize who he is. But when he does get through to them and he makes his presence known, they can focus on him and not the waves. So when he says "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid," the storm is still raging, the storm doesn't stop for a while, but now the one they've come to rely on—the one they've always been able to rely on—is with them.

Sometimes on a Sunday when we read the three lessons and sing the Psalm, we wonder (including the pastors) what the connections are between the lessons. Sometimes even the pastors have no idea where the connecting line is. The Old Testament story connects very well with this Gospel lesson. It's about a person of God who is in a sense in the midst of a storm in his life. Actually, Elijah is in the eye of the storm. Where we pick up on Elijah's story in today's lesson is this: Elijah has proven himself to be the one true prophet of the Lord God in Israel. He, in fact, has won a contest over hundreds of other false prophets. But that doesn't do him any good, because the king and queen of Israel, Ahab and Jezebel, could care less. They still don't care about the God that Elijah worships; they refuse to worship the Lord God; they refuse to accept Elijah as the true prophet; and in fact, they threaten to take Elijah's life. So at the point where we meet up with him today, he's hiding out in a cave, he's in despair, and they're coming after him.

In this eye of the storm, in this relative moment of calm, the Lord God makes his presence known. Now I grant you, the situation hasn't changed—the after part of the hurricane is still coming—Ahab and Jezebel are still looking for him. But in this moment, what has changed is that Elijah finds out that he's not alone. There are thousands of people who will worship his God, and in fact, the Lord God Himself is present and he's working his holy purposes, he's raising up other prophets, he's making his glorious name known. And once Elijah realizes this, he can begin to focus rightly—not on the wave action, not on the storm (that would only reduce him to hopelessness)—but focus rightly on his ever-faithful God.

Probably most of you know the name of this particular room where we worship. It's called a "nave." "Nave" is from the Latin for "ship" which I think is very appropriate to consider on this day! You and I are Jesus followers and this is our boat. We are less than perfect, we are struggling in our discipleship, we are simultaneously saints and sinners, and we're in this boat together. So carry that to our mission as a congregation. How Trinity Lutheran Church is called to be in this place, and our mission to speak Christ to the world. We can find the ride rough going sometimes in our mission, as we try to envision what we are to be here, we may experience some choppy waters, and we may be unsure of, and sometimes can't agree on, our destination. Sometimes we have too many captains of the boat. Sometimes we don't have enough people to row. And sometimes when we do have enough

people to rowed what my children did in the middle of Pinhot Lake in their boat - they went around in circles - we could drown at cross purposes in our zeal and in our sinfulness, and we can end up going nowhere

And then there are all of our individual boats. They face choppy waves, too. Sometimes that's all we focus on. Sometimes we are as uncertain as individuals in our own little boats as we are as a corporate body. I suspect that few of us could say with any conviction that we've never felt anxious or frustrated in our own storms; that we've never been heartbroken or lonely; that we've never been angry or afraid. And most of us at one time or another have dared to wonder, maybe even aloud, if God is with us in the midst of our storm.

The lessons today say without a doubt the answer to the questions that has been asked by humans for centuries. Even in the midst of chaos and storm, is God here with me? Even if evidence suggests to the contrary, is God with us? And our lessons today say unequivocally: Yes. Yes! When Maya Pi was brought to the baptismal waters, that's the answer to the question, too. Maya we're bringing you here because we say God will be always with you. She can count on that; she can trust in Him. And when she is old enough to read and you put in her hands the Holy Scriptures, she gets the chance to look at the whole gospel of Matthew.

Those words of Jesus in today's lesson resonate through the entire gospel. What you read in the gospel of Matthew is the very Son of God saying "Take heart, it is I," "Don't be afraid. You're going to go through storms in your life, but I will never leave you," "Right now I'm reaching out my hand and lifting you up," "Go and tell others about me and teach them what I've taught you," and "I promise to be with you and my grace and power will sustain you to the close of the age."

In her book *Breathing Space*, Pastor Heidi Neunark talks about how she visited a number of times a parishioner from her South Bronx congregation who had been burned in one of the World Trade Center towers on September 11. The New York Presbyterian Hospital was the place she went, and most of the surviving burn victims were sent there. Day after day when she visited, she noticed one hospital chaplain who always seemed to be there at the same time, walking the floors. Pastor Neunark wondered to herself how this chaplain managed it, how she could walk that hallway, day after day, in the midst of so much pain and suffering. So one day Pastor Neunark went up to the chaplain and asked her, "How are you holding up?" And this is what Pastor Neunark said happened next. The chaplain "looked at me like I was crazy and gave voice to my worst fears. 'I'm not holding up,' she said. Then there was a pause, as she took a deep breath. 'I'm not holding up,' she repeated, 'I'm being held up.'"

Our scripture reminds us today that even when we can no longer possibly hold ourselves up in the storm, we will be held up. Today we're gathered in this boat of ours and right in our midst God is reaching out His hand and is reach out to us and is pulling us up. He is giving us what we need to weather the storm. He tells us not to focus on the waves and the wave action, but to focus instead on Him. He promises to get us to our destination, to the place we need to be. And then He'll strengthen us there, so that we can reach out our hand and lift someone else out of the water, so they need never fear the storm. They won't be pulled under by the waves, but rather they'll be welcomed to life with God.

Amen