

Reflection for August 9, 2020

Reflection:

Today's lectionary readings gave us two dramatic scripture passages. Let's delve into the passage from Matthew – Jesus walking on water. I was thinking of the sailors in the congregation when I was preparing for today. I am not a sailor. Canoes, kayaks, ferries...those are the boats I am familiar with. But I have heard the stories of people being at the mercy of the wind and waves. When I was little we had a family friend who was a fisherman. He was lost at sea. I was young and don't remember much from that time, but I know that it left me with a healthy respect for the power of the water.

There is an old hymn that testifies, "Jesus calls us o'er the tumult of our life's wild, restless sea." In the Gospel reading this week, Jesus indeed calls to his disciples in the midst of the wild and restless sea¹, but he is not beckoning them away from the wind and the waves. Instead, his voice calls them *into* the tumult.

Let's set the scene, last week we heard of the feeding of the 5000. John the Baptizer had been executed, and Jesus wanted to get away to pray, but the crowds wanted to hear his teachings. Today, we enter the story when the teaching is completed for the day, people have been fed and are about to return home. Now at this point, Jesus also sends the disciples away.

The text says that Jesus *made* the disciples get into the boat (14:22). A better translation of this main verb could be "to compel." Jesus did not give the disciples a choice. He *compelled* them to get into the boat and to leave him to be by himself. He wants to pray. I think he needs to pray.

It is not insignificant that Jesus retreats to the mountain while he has sent his disciples out into the raging chaos of the sea. The mountain in Matthew's Gospel is a place for encountering God and hearing the proclamation of God's glorious kingdom (e.g., 5:1-7:29; 17:1-8). Moses and Elijah also encounter God on the mountain. So, he climbs alone to a mountain for his rendezvous with God.

Jesus stays on the mountain to pray. Twice the writer states that Jesus is by himself (14:23). While Jesus is alone conversing with God, the disciples find themselves in a life-threatening situation.

The disciples are far from land, and the boat is being “battered” (14:24) by the waves.

There is a similar story earlier in Matthew’s gospel, where the disciples were also in a boat in a storm, that Jesus was with them and they were able to turn to him and he stilled the storm (8:23-27). In our passage this week, though, the disciples do not have the luxury of awaking Jesus. Jesus is not there.

The disciples have been struggling on the water for a while. The text says that it is the early morning hours, while it is still dark, that Jesus makes his appearance.

The disciples, though, do not initially recognize Jesus in the midst of the chaos. They have been alone with the threatening waves for hours. They are probably tired from being up all night. It is here in the chaos, when their their energy reserves are spent, Jesus reveals himself to them.

In this exhausted state with the roar of the waves and the spray of the sea drenching their boat, they mistake Jesus for a ghost. Commentator Iwan Russell-Jones reminds us modern readers that in Hebraic thought water often represents more than mere physical reality. It represents chaos. Whether it’s the seas with unfathomable depths, or the relentless drive of the all-consuming deluge, there is something metaphysical that the threat of water poses to human life. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, it is this reality over which God’s power is continuously demonstrated. Think of the very creation of the world, the rains that led to the covenant with Noah, or the deliverance from Pharaoh’s army. It is hard to blame them for initially mistaking the figure of Jesus for a specter. After all, they are in the middle of the lake, surrounded by water, chaos’ realm, with waves battering them.

Over their cries of fear, Jesus calls to them, “Take heart, it is I; have no fear” (15:27). A more literal translation of this sentence would be, “Take heart, *I AM*, do not be afraid.” Jesus reveals himself -- not simply as Jesus, their teacher, as “I

AM.” This self-revelation is a disclosure of Jesus’ source of power. For Matthew’s Jewish Christian audience, Jesus’ words echo the divine name.

Jesus’ self-revelation moves beyond his words. His actions are also revealing. According to Job 9:8, God alone stretched out the heavens and trampled the waves of the Sea. In Psalm 89:9, the psalmist exalts the Lord, “You rule over the surging sea; when its waves mount up, you still them.” In the midst of the sea’s churning, Jesus does what only God can do.

The last time Jesus revealed his power over the chaos of the sea he did so within the confines of the boat. Even then, his power confounded the disciples. Now, he is displaying his power in the death-defying stunt of walking on the sea.

But I don’t think that this revelation is meant to terrorize or bring fear (“Take heart, have no fear”).

When confronted with the inexplicable reality of Jesus who has revealed authority over the chaos of the water just by walking, Peter does the inexplicable: he asks to meet Jesus in the tumult. “Command me to come to you.” (14:28). Peter wants to accompany Jesus in his walk. *[I am pretty sure that I would be one of the other 11 who stayed put in the relative safety of the boat.]*

“Come” Jesus replies, and Peter boldly steps out of the boat and takes those first few steps. The text does not say that Jesus calmed the seas to make Peter’s steps easier. In fact, it is the wind that frightens Peter, distracts him and causes him to sink. It was only Jesus’ call that made it possible for Peter to make any strides in the first place.

In some ways I am grateful for protagonists like Elijah and Peter. They both incredible successes and also have incredible failures. Elijah demonstrated the power of God by eliminating the prophets of Baal, who will call Israel back to its covenant, who will anoint kings and prophets...and yet, in today’s reading we find him completely dejected, ready to give up. And we have Peter, who is brave and faithful enough to get out of a boat in the middle of the lake and actually walk on water, who will be the Rock that the church is built on and yet in our story today he also lets the wind change his focus away from Jesus and starts to sink.

Sometimes it seems like we can too easily see ourselves as either failure or success. But life isn't so black and white. I appreciate these stories that remind me I don't have to be defined by any one moment. That God, in God's infinite grace and mercy, loves my whole being. And that I am not alone.

Peter is sinking, and he cries out "Save me, Lord" (14:30). It's a prayer many of us, myself included, have prayed when we are sinking and desperate. Prayer is important in both of today's readings. The difference between Elijah and Peter compared to Jesus is that Jesus prays first, while Elijah and Peter pray when they are in trouble.

At this point in our narrative, the story sounds remarkably like the previous miracle on the sea. Following Peter's cry for the Lord's salvation, Jesus poses a question of faith, "O man of little faith, why did you doubt?" (14:30-31).

I just want to make a quick note about Jesus' term "little faith". You can't hear tone in the text, you have to imagine it, and I imagine that this isn't a rebuke. He says, "little faith" not "no faith". Remember that parable of the mustard seed and that a little faith can move mountains.

This week's text, however, ends by answering the question posed when Jesus calmed the storm. That time, the disciples were left wondering who Jesus is. This calming of the sea ends with a declaration, "Truly you are the Son of God." (14:33).

It is clear that we are being called to step out in faith, even in the midst of today's troubled waters. Stepping out is not a guarantee that we will not face troubled waters or be filled with fear but is always accompanied by the assurance that Jesus won't abandon us, but will instead extend a saving arm, gets into the boat with us.

A ship was one of the earliest symbols for Christianity. Years ago, when I was in Tiberias by the Sea of Galilee, we visited St. Peter's Church. The ceiling was the shape of an upturned boat. Boats aren't static, they are a vehicle for people from one place to the next. I see the church as a boat, a vehicle for us to get where we

need to go to participate in God's divine action. We need to remember that the boat isn't the final destination.

Despite Peter's distraction and sinking, he did for a few brief steps walk on water. And the other disciples are watching. Between their fear of the storm and the ghost and their acknowledgement of Jesus as the Son of God, is one person's willingness to risk everything. The bold risk of one follower of Jesus moving towards the call to love and trust has an effect on the whole community of followers. God is crafting a community of believers, we see how God is working this way through both Elijah and Peter.

In Matthew's Gospel, this story is meant to reveal who Jesus is. But that revelation is only possible in the midst of the chaos. If Jesus had not forced the disciples to embark on this uncertain journey, they would have missed the opportunity to see God revealed in their midst.

I wonder...

- How do you listen, how do you pay attention to where God is revealing God's self, to what God is doing?
- How we respond to God?
- How we are being asked to step out in faith today, to boldly risk, to join in God's divine action?

Blessing in the Chaos —*Jan Richardson*

To all that is chaotic
in you,
let there come silence.

Let there be
a calming
of the clamoring,
a stilling
of the voices that
have laid their claim
on you,

that have made their
home in you,

that go with you
even to the
holy places
but will not
let you rest,
will not let you
hear your life
with wholeness
or feel the grace
that fashioned you.

Let what distracts you
cease.

Let what divides you
cease.

Let there come an end
to what diminishes
and demeans,
and let depart
all that keeps you
in its cage.

Let there be
an opening
into the quiet
that lies beneath
the chaos,
where you find
the peace
you did not think
possible
and see what shimmers
within the storm.

Nancy Walker