

Scriptures: Gen. 37:1-4,12-28; Matt. 14:22-33

## **Joseph Sold into Slavery**

We've talked before about how dysfunctional some of the families were in Bible times. This morning we heard the sad story of Joseph being sold into slavery in Egypt. Jacob favored his youngest son, Joseph, because he was the only child of Rachel. We talked last week about how Jacob had two wives – Leah and Rachel – and he didn't love Leah, but adored Rachel. As it turns out, Joseph was a bit of a tattletale. He'd go out to the fields to see what his older half-brothers were doing, and then go back to tell on them. We see the level of animosity the brothers felt towards Joseph – they had originally planned to murder him! Joseph came out wearing his coat of many colors, but his brothers were green with envy. Plotting his murder, and then deciding to sell him into slavery instead, it's hard to get much more dysfunctional than that!

Realistically, Joseph would have been a boy, under age 12. Can you imagine the trauma the kid went through, being ripped away from his family, and the life he'd known? He must have felt hopeless, especially when he was hauled away by the Ishmaelite and Midianite merchants who bought him for twenty pieces of silver. Have you ever felt hopeless, Church? I have. Today we're going to read a time when one of Jesus' disciples felt hopeless, and what happened to him. If you have your Bible, or a Bible app handy, turn with me to Matthew 14:22-33. I'm reading from the NRSV this morning. **Read Matthew 14:22-33.**

Just prior to the text we just read, Jesus has found out that his cousin, John the Baptist, has been beheaded, and is trying to get to a quiet spot to pray, only to be followed by a huge crowd of people who wanted healed from their illnesses. He does that, of course, and then goes on to miraculously feed more than 5,000 of them with five loaves and two fish. Everyone was filled, and the leftovers were collected, which brings us to verse 22 of our passage, "Immediately He made the disciples get into a boat and go ahead to the other side, while He dismissed the crowds." Our words matter. The things we say, and the way we say them are important.

## **Word Matter**

Jesus doesn't "suggest" for the disciples to go for a boat ride. He doesn't "ask" them if they want to, He doesn't even "tell" them. We're told He "made" them get in the boat and go. Why is He so insistent? Were the disciples reluctant for some reason? We know a few of them were fishermen before they started following Jesus. Could they smell the storm coming?

We could ask endless questions of this passage – and that's something we ought to do anytime we approach the Scriptures. We should ask questions. See friends, God will not be offended by our "whys" when we're trying to grow deeper in understanding the depth of His love for us.

"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," (verses 23-24). Here we see that Jesus finally gets His chance to rest in prayer with the Father. Being able

to have Sabbath rest is important! It boils down to self-care. We're only equipped and enabled as Christ followers to the extent that we allow the Father to fill us up with the Holy Spirit.

### **A Life In Christ**

This summer we've been reading a lot of parables. So this week's reading is a change of pace. It's a life lesson for the disciples and for us. It's a parable writ large, and in real time. It illustrates the necessary underpinnings of a life in Christ. They talk about this extensively on Emmaus Walks, if you've ever been on one – you know there's an entire half hour talk dedicated to the life in Christ. A life in Christ is dependent upon our faith, our hope, and our embrace of God's grace poured out for us at the cross.

Look, none of us volunteered to be born. We weren't asked. We weren't told. We were *made*. God, in His infinite wisdom and love, launched us out into life's troubled sea without asking us what we thought of it. And this is where the disciples find themselves in today's story. They're wet and cold, frightened and lone. Jesus is giving them a dose of "tough love," a lesson in faith that will last their lifetimes and resonate down through the ages.

"And early in the morning He came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear," (verses 25-26). Besides the storm raging around them, a figure appears on the horizon walking toward the boat on top of the water – can you imagine it? I've been on boats before. Kendra, the girls, and I have taken the Catawba Island ferry to Put-in-Bay several times, and there were times when the wind and waves had the boats rocking pretty good. In all those times being at Lake Erie, I've seen plenty of people in the water, but I've never seen a person walk on water!

### **It Is I (I Am)**

Jesus, the God-Man does, however. And His disciples find the experience to be unnerving! Notice what happens next. "But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid,'" (verse 27). Now, I'm not sure why Bible translators did this – most of the translations, even the King James Version, does this – they translate that middle statement of Jesus, as "It is I." The original Greek text translates, literally, as "I Am." He's saying, "Don't be afraid, I Am." Why is that significant?

Well, way back in Exodus 3 Moses sees the burning bush – remember that Bible story? Moses sees the bush burning, and decides to take a closer look, and God speaks to him from the bush, and tells him, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob," (Ex. 3:6). Then God tells Moses He is sending Moses to Pharaoh, to tell him to let God's people go. And Moses answers, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" (verse 11). Do you know what God tells Moses? He says, "I will be with you," (verse 12). Then He goes on to tell Moses His name, because Moses says "suppose the people ask me, 'What is His name?'" (verse 13). And God responds, "I Am Who I Am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I Am has sent me to you,'" (verse 14).

Jesus, in saying, “It is I,” or “I Am,” in Matthew 14:27, is identifying Himself as God. And He goes on to tell the disciples that He’s present. Friends, that’s the message for today. In this gospel account, Jesus is telling them – and us – that when we are struggling, when we’re adrift and far from shore, when the wind is against us – He is with us! Hold tightly to your faith! He never leaves us alone! In a troubled marriage, with a career in shambles, in sickness, grief, depression, despair – through all of it, Jesus comes to us in the storm. If we have the faith, or at least have the courage to suspend our nagging disbelief, He will come to us, cutting through every trouble we can possibly imagine.

### **Peter the Every Man**

Significantly, in this gospel account, Jesus does not join the disciples in the boat when they set sail for the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Instead, He calls out to them. I have to hand it to Peter – as one of the leading disciples, he’s one of the first guys wanting proof. “Peter answered Him, ‘Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water,’” (Matt. 14:28). Blessed, bumbling, betraying Peter really shines in this gospel. He’s an “every man,” the perfect character to showcase the power of faith. While instinct and experience tell Peter to hold back, when Jesus calls Peter, he immediately responds.

“He said, ‘Come.’ So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus,” (verse 29). Peter jumps out of the boat and onto the water – not *into* the water. Then he walks across the waves to meet Jesus. So, if we’re counting, only two people I know of have ever walked on water – Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and Simon Peter – albeit his walk was incredibly brief! “When he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’ (verse 30). Walking the way of Jesus is not easy. Peter is storm tossed and terrified. His initial enthusiasm is overwhelmed by the sudden realization of his surroundings. He panics, starts to sink, and calls out, “Lord, save me!”

How very much like our own journey of faith! We wrestle with doubts and fears. Yet Christ calls to us across life’s waters, and our self-serving instincts shout back, “Take a chance on faith? Are you crazy? Play it safe. Stay in the boat.” Even when we take our first faltering steps, we quickly learn that the journey of faith isn’t a day at the beach. It’s a whole lifetime of obstacles and doubt, frustrations and even persecutions – some very petty, similar to what we’ve experienced, but some are very perilous.

### **What Are We Seeking?**

Kendra has a friend, Patricia, she’s known since high school who lives down in Brazil. In that country, everyone has wi-fi services installed by the government. Patricia was in the armed forces, and even has a picture of herself on social media with President Bolsonaro who left office December 31, 2022. When his successor, President Lula da Silva, took office on January 1, 2023, the Brazilian government passed a decree banning criticism of the government. Since everyone is on government-controlled wi-fi, authorities are able to pinpoint where social media posts are coming from at the building level.

This lady was told to round up the people in a building because someone had posted their dislike of President Lula da Silva on social media, and she refused to follow orders. She and Kendra would talk a couple times a month through messenger, but she hasn't heard from her since shortly after Lula da Silva took office in January. As Americans, we enjoy many freedoms, which other countries do not enjoy. This lady, for doing the right thing, and refusing to round up the inhabitants of an apartment building, may have paid the ultimate price for freedom.

What motivates us to do what we do? Or, put another way, what are we seeking? To be an open, active, faithful follower of Jesus Christ today can truly feel like walking on stormy waters. And we have more than gravity pulling us down. We have a society asking us, "What's the point in believing?" We have worse than wind and wave to smack us around. In the war-torn streets of Ukrainian villages, in the military headquarters of Niamey, Niger, where army rebels have held their elected president as a hostage for three weeks, and in the cynical offices of Hollywood and Washington, DC, Christ isn't wanted or welcomed. People don't have time to focus on Him, and on reshaping their lives to better reflect His Lordship over them.

### **A Prayer God Answers**

Friends, like the disciples, especially Peter, we can say, "Lord, save me!" when we're being put to the test. That's a prayer, and God is happy to answer it! Look what Jesus does for Peter. "Jesus immediately reached out His hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?'" (verse 31). In a world of turmoil and upheaval, like Peter, we can walk to Christ on the firm footing of faith. In our fear, our doubt, our disappointment, He is only a prayer away. We only need to cry out to Him, "Lord, save me!" or "Lord, help me!" And He will take us up in His saving, healing hands. When we do that, a similar situation occurs in our lives, as what the disciples experienced that early morning on the boat.

The passage closes with the statement, "When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped Him, saying, 'Truly You are the Son of God,'" (verses 32-33). When we call on Christ to save us, or to help us, He's eager to respond. And His presence with us, and in us, calms the impact of whatever sort of storm we're going through. He gives us His peace. Like Peter and the other disciples, our response to His presence ought to be worship and adoration. So church, if there's something you've been going through, take heart! Christ is with us – and for us!

**Prayer:** Through the storms of life, O God, You are with Your people in the person of Jesus Christ, Your Son. Calm our fears and strengthen our faith that we may never doubt His presence among us but proclaim that He is Your Son, risen from the dead, living forever and ever. Amen.