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Matthew 14:22-33

## IF THE WEATHER HOLDS

I was talking with a friend the other day and we both agreed that life right now feels as if it is in a state of suspended animation. Much of life feels as we have hit the pause button and we are waiting for things to happen. We are waiting for better times. We are waiting for a vaccine to end this pandemic. We are waiting to learn if schools will re-open and if so, how. We are waiting to decide if church should resume in-person worship. We are waiting for the election to take place. We are waiting to find out whether the government will come through with more public aid. There is a lot of waiting going on right now.

In these turbulent days of anxiety and disruption brought on by both the pandemic as well as social and political matters, the biblical passage from Matthew today about the stormy sea crossing seems especially relevant. Life feels very stormy right now. And sometimes it feels as if we are holding on tight to the sides of the boat, waiting for better weather. How soon until we are out of this storm? How soon until life gets better?

That is often our approach to the storms of life. We cling on, enduring the ride, as we wait for better weather. We have developed a mind-set that life, genuine, meaningful life, *real* life is lived in the days of good weather. And so we journey through life hoping and praying for the weather to hold: for our health to last, for our relationships to be free from complications, for our children to be happy and our jobs to be fulfilling, for our bank accounts to be stable. If the weather holds, life will be good.

The trouble with that mind-set is that there are a lot of storms in life. In fact, sometimes storms—whether big storms or small storms—seem to be the rule rather than the exception.

There are usually many factors and circumstances that disrupt our sunny days: illness, job problems, relationship challenges, the death of loved ones, accidents that happen, addictions and other unhealthy behaviors that affect our lives. Storms of all kinds can arise all of a sudden out of nowhere—like the pandemic.

This describes the conditions of the Sea of Galilee, the body of water that is at the center of Matthew's reading today. Even to this day, the Sea of Galilee is known for its sudden and violent storms that arise out of nowhere. The disciples were fishermen and so they expected that storms would be part of their experience on the Sea of Galilee. That doesn't mean they liked the storms, or wanted the storms to take place. It doesn't mean that the disciples are unafraid of the storms. The storms were no doubt frightening even to experienced fishermen. But it does mean that these fishermen did not kid themselves about the reality of storms. They knew storms would happen and that they could come about quite suddenly. And so they lived with this expectation.

Since a great deal of life does *not* involve fair weather, we might want to re-evaluate the strategy we tend to adopt regarding the storms of life. If we simply cling on and wait for fairer skies, we will have missed a significant portion of life. What if meaningful life isn't found in those sunny days *between* storms, but rather *during* the storms themselves?

Those first disciples knew almost nothing except turbulence and turmoil. Those early disciples were born into great poverty. Hunger and illness and death were part of everyday life. They lived under the extremely oppressive and cruel rule of the Roman Empire. Most days were filled with uncertainty and anxiety. The story Matthew gives us is about a literal storm at sea, but it was symbolic of the storms of life that those early disciples, and those early Christians reading this story, would have known every day of their lives.

This story invites us to consider what our approach will be when we encounter the storms of life. Will we just cling on, endure the storm, and wait and pine for better times? Or is there a more meaningful approach?

In Matthew's text today, Jesus is not with the disciples when the storm hits. He is on the land while the disciples, representing the Christian Church, are out alone in the boat. And the wind picks up, and the boat is tossed about by the storm. And as the disciples are trying to cling on for dear life, Jesus comes toward them, walking on the sea. They think Jesus is a ghost. But Jesus states, "Take heart, it is I." The literal translation of that phrase is, "Take heart, I am." I am. "I am" references the divine name God uttered to Moses at the burning bush. Moses wanted to know God's name and God said, "I am who I am." From that statement, "I Am," comes the Hebrew name for God *Yahweh*. So when Jesus, standing in the waves, says to the disciples, "I Am," they would have immediately heard him reference God's name. The message was clear. God was with them. God was present with them in the storm. They may have felt alone out there in the storm, but they were not. God was with them.

When the storms of life hit, Jesus invites us to have faith that God is indeed with us. Faith is a key element to managing the storms. But what is faith? That word can be so loaded with many meanings. Is faith a set of beliefs or ideas we profess? Is faith a feeling or an emotion we cannot adequately articulate? Is faith a set of actions and behaviors we carry out even we aren't always sure we understand the mysteries of the divine? Yes, to all of the above. Faith is hard to pin down. What is certain is that faith is never settled once and for all. Most of us live somewhere along a spectrum between faith and doubt. Sometimes faith is something we have as long as the weather holds. But when the storms of life arise, when heartache or loss hit us, then it is lost to us. We feel betrayed by God, abandoned by God.

But our story today tells us that God does not abandon us to the storm. God is with us. And having faith that God is with us then changes how we approach the storm. When we trust God is with us, we will look for God's presence and see signs of God with us. When we trust God is with us, we can perhaps loosen our death grip on the boat and look for ways to live and act in meaningful ways during the storm. When we trust God is with us, we are not quite so frightened. When we trust God is with us, we can rely upon a strength that comes from someone outside of ourselves. Faith that God is with us changes *how* we live through the storm.

The disciple Peter gives us another approach to facing the storms of life. When Peter sees Jesus walking toward them on the water, he calls out to Jesus, "If it is really you, command me to come to you." So Jesus says "come." And Peter gets out of the boat and walks on the water toward Jesus. Now throughout history, people have remembered this story because of what happens next: how Peter suddenly realizes what he is doing, freaks out, and begins to sink. But think about the first part of that encounter. Think about how Peter first gets out of the boat and walks toward Jesus.

Storms in life give us the opportunity to step toward Jesus. We step toward Jesus when, even in our own hardships, we reach out to others with love and compassion. We step toward Jesus when, in the midst of a stormy conflict with another person that has broken hearts and hurt feelings, we strive to forgive and reconcile. We reach out to Jesus when in the midst of a pandemic when our own lives face uncertainty, we strive to feed the hungry and raise money for those who have lost their jobs. We step toward Jesus when in the storms of injustice and social unrest, we stand with the oppressed. One way to manage the storms of life is to continue to step toward Jesus and the way of Jesus. But the most important thing we learn is that in all of life's

storms, whether we are walking or sinking, whether we are believing or doubting, Jesus is always stepping toward us.