

## 8-13-17 Sermon - "Disciples Without Jesus" – Matthew 14:22-33

It was a dark and stormy night.

Well, that's where our story ends up, but it's not how it begins. It begins as the sun is just beginning to set over a hillside in Galilee. Jesus and his disciples and have shared a meal in the wilderness with over 5,000 men, women, and children all fed from the meager five loaves and two fish Jesus and his disciples had been able to scrounge up.

But now the feast is, over, and it's time for everyone to hurry home before dark. So Jesus instructs his disciples to get into their boat and go ahead on over to the other side of the Sea of Galilee while he dismisses the crowds. Actually, the Greek word is a little stronger than just "instructed", it's more like "commanded" or even "coerced."

It seems that the disciples were somewhat resistant to going on their way without Jesus. Maybe they knew he was heading up the mountain to pray for a little while, to grieve the death of his dear friend John the Baptist, and they, like many of you, were concerned about him going off and "hiking alone." Or maybe they looked around, saw the sun going down, the clouds forming, felt the wind starting to blow, and weren't so sure it was a good idea to cross the sea right now. Why not wait until morning, Jesus?

But, they obey Jesus, set out across the sea, night falls, and sure enough, the storm comes. Believe it or not, I have actually been in a boat on the Sea of Galilee during a thunderstorm. A few years ago, I was part of a group Presbyterians who visited Palestine and Israel for a Peacemaking Conference. Our hosts had arranged for us to travel cross the Sea of Galilee on a boat, just like Jesus and the disciples, though this boat was motor-powered and quite a bit bigger. It was mid-afternoon, and not too long after we set out, a system of clouds rolled in over the hills, and just as quickly as one of these New Mexico monsoons starts up, we were in a full-fledged storm. And I'll tell you – I understand why those disciples were scared!

You'll recall that we've been hearing Jesus preach in parables for several Sundays. And so, when we hear this morning's reading, we might be inclined to think that we've moved on into narrative, into stories about Jesus. But I wouldn't shift gears just yet. Because it turns out, Matthew may be using this story to tell a little parable of his own, a parable about what it means to be the church after the Resurrection, to be disciples without Jesus.

You see, the very first Christians described the church using the symbol of a boat. It was the "ark of salvation," like Noah's ark, a refuge and place of protection from the wind and waves of the world. Anyone in Matthew's church who heard this story would have immediately recognized that there's something more going on here than what is literally taking place. It's like if someone comes up to me and says, "A priest, a rabbi, and a minister walk into a bar." From my knowledge of the symbols and language of our society, I can fairly safely assume that what follows is going to be a joke, not an invitation to the local interfaith happy hour.

Similarly, Matthew's community would have clued in to the description of the deep, dark waters of the sea. In the Hebrew Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament, the sea is a symbol of chaos, of unknown and insurmountable powers that only God can control. When God created the earth, we hear that "the earth was a formless void, and darkness covered the faith of the deep. And then a wind from God, swept over the waters," and God began to create: to tame the chaos and the darkness of those primordial waters and order them for God's purposes.

So if we were sitting in Matthew's church nearly 2,000 years ago and listening to this story, we would have quickly begun to realize that this is not just a story about Jesus and his disciples. No, this is about them – about *us* – a story about the church. About a group of disciples

tossed by the winds of persecution, seeking to be faithful even in the most dangerous of times. And scared – terrified – because they have been sent forth into this dark and unknown territory without Jesus there to protect them.

This is the experience of the first Christians, of the post-Resurrection Church. They are the church sent forth into the world, the boat on a stormy sea. They move forward in faith, into trials and persecution, all without the physical presence of Jesus to keep them safe. To drive away their fear.

This is what Christian life looks like for us too, isn't it? Sure, our boat is a little bigger than that of the first disciples, maybe a little better fortified. Our wind, sea, and waves, may look different than the ones the first Christians weathered. They were faced with persecution; we are confronted with accusations of cultural irrelevance. They expected an imminent apocalypse; we look anxiously around at the signs of climate change. They preached the Gospel in the seemingly undefeatable Roman Empire; we preach it in a globalized, interconnected world, one in which we humans have developed the capacities to annihilate not only our enemies but also ourselves.

But at the end of the day, we, too, are disciples without Jesus. We, too, are called, by the one we confess to be Lord and Savior, to step forward in faith, to move in the direction of God's light and love, even when we find ourselves in uncharted waters. Even in the very teeth of the storm.

Yesterday, several of my friends, colleagues, and loved ones responded to that call to be the church in the middle of the storm. Many of you know that I grew up in Richmond, Virginia. Drive an hour to the west of Richmond, and you are in Charlottesville, home of the University of Virginia, from which my dad and my youngest brother graduated and where I interned for a summer as a hospital chaplain. Yesterday, a group of white supremacists and Nazis gathered for a rally in Charlottesville. They came with weapons, with Confederate and Nazi flags, and with chants of hatred about Jews, people of color, immigrants...the list goes on. By the time they left, at least three Virginia residents were dead, and dozens had been hospitalized with injuries.

Our stormy seas may look different than those of the early Christians, but have no doubt – storms are raging still.

Yesterday, white supremacists descended on Charlottesville with hate; and yesterday, Jesus' disciples responded with faith and love. People of faith from Charlottesville and from all over Virginia gathered for prayer vigils and non-violent witness. They stood up and said, "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, we denounce hate, racism, violence, white supremacy, and anything that harms our fellow human beings." They gathered in the park – Presbyterians and Episcopalians and Baptists and Methodists and Unitarians and Jews and so many others – and said prayers. They sang spirituals. They stepped forth in faith and stood on the stormy waters.

And lest we begin to idealize those who stood up yesterday as "people out there" – let me assure you, friends, these disciples, just like Peter, felt fear. Many of them saw the wind and the waves and felt their faith foundations waver, beginning to sink. My friend Allison describes a moment when she stepped away from the group to use the restroom at the McDonalds down the street. Before she even reached the door of the restaurant, Allison says, she was surrounded by a group of white supremacists mocking her and threatening her and trying to pick a fight. Like Peter, Allison had stepped out of the boat. No longer surrounded by her fellow disciples but instead by the roaring wind and the battering waves, she, too, began to sink.

And then she felt a hand on her arm – a gentle touch, not a hostile one – and she looked up to see one of her fellow disciples who saw that she was surrounded and had come with several others to surround her with safety and pull her back into the boat.

That's how the story goes, isn't it? In the middle of the storm, Jesus comes to the disciples – Jesus comes to *us* – walking on the water. We are called to step forth in faith onto a turbulent sea, but it turns out that Jesus is never far behind us. Even in our deepest fear, we are accompanied by Jesus Christ, the Lord of Heaven and Earth, who walks calmly toward us over the powers of chaos, and darkness, and destruction.

In our world of faith and fear, Jesus reaches out his hand and catches us. For even when we doubt, we remain in the presence of Jesus our Savior. The God who persistently calls us to step away from comfort and safety is the same God who reaches out to save us when we stumble and fall.

And into our world of isolation – into that place where we feel most alone, like disciples without Jesus – steps the one whom the prophets foretold, whom the angel said would be called “Emmanuel” – God with us. A promise from the God who created us that that God will *never* abandon us. We may take steps into the darkness, but we will never take them alone.

After Jesus reaches out his hand and catches Peter, he says to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” Often we read this comment as criticizing Peter's lack of faith. Certainly the author of the passage we heard from James this morning doesn't have much room in his theology for those of us who, like Peter, feel some fear and begin to doubt.

I'm not so convinced, though, that this comment is a criticism of Peter as much as a reflection on the reality of being human, of being a disciple without Jesus. To be honest, I picture Jesus saying this with an amused smile on his face, shaking his head at Peter the way a mother might shake her head at her toddler's antics.

Jesus says that Peter has “little faith”, but perhaps a little faith is enough. After all, this is the same Jesus who tells his disciples that even faith the size of a tiny mustard seed is enough to move mountains, to usher in the Kingdom of Heaven.

This is the same Jesus who chooses imperfect disciples – people like you and like me and like Allison and like Peter, to accomplish his holy work.

Turns out we don't need to be able to walk on water, or calm the sea. We don't need to steer the boat or even to chart our own course through the murky waters. We just need a little faith in a Savior and Lord who is Emmanuel, God with us – just enough faith to take the first step.