

“Eye of the Storm”
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Readings: Matthew 14:22-33

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In our Genesis story today, our text makes special mention of water. Joseph, we are told, is left not only in a pit, but in a pit with no water. Joseph finds himself in extreme dryness, unprotected from the sun, exposed and alone. This water denial drives home the cruelty of the brothers; it leaves little doubt that their intention was never to spare Joseph. Water at this moment, for Joseph, would surely represent a balm, something sustaining, something that might leave open the possibility for life.

We now leave Joseph, alone in that pit without the hope represented by water, and journey to our Gospels... where we will encounter our disciples in a similarly dire predicament. This time, however, water is not life-giving, but life-threatening. The disciples find themselves tortured by waves, on the brink of capsizing, facing the very real possibility of drowning. Listen now to our familiar Gospel story, as found in Matthew 14:22-33 –

22 Immediately [Jesus] made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵And early in the morning he came walking towards them on

the lake. ²⁶But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified, saying, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out in fear. ²⁷But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.'

28 Peter answered him, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.' ²⁹He said, 'Come.' So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came towards Jesus. ³⁰But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!' ³¹Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?' ³²When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'

This is the Word of the Lord. *Thanks be to God.*

My mother-in-law, Nancy, is a marriage and family therapist. I have no doubt Joseph's family could have avoided a fair amount of heartache if they had come to Nancy.

I remember her describing to me one time what it was like working with a family in crisis. She describes it as a sandstorm. Each individual finds themselves tossed in this storm, swept and tortured by the uncontrollable wind. Like a piece of sand they are whipped through the air as everything around them becomes displaced. Equilibrium is lost to chaos. Everything they have known is no longer at rest on the ground. In crisis, there are no longer rules; in a sandstorm, gravity sounds trite and meaningless. No longer can you count on the things you have come to trust.

In such a storm, it is impossible to see in front of you, behind you, below you. But one thing seems undeniable – that nothing will ever be the same. That life has been battered into an unrecognizable frenzy, and it will never be recognizable again.

Our disciples find themselves in a similar frenzy. Battered by wind and rain, they are in the midst of chaos. Doubtless they fear for their lives. Like our families in crisis, our disciples sense acutely how little control they really have of their lives. Such a helpless sensation was perhaps more common in Jesus' time, that vulnerability in the face of nature. We, after all, control so much of the world. Our water comes on cue; it comes hot or cold to our liking. In storms, I find myself quite comfortable indoors listening to the thunder.

But Nancy's families sound awfully familiar. Each of us has a story of chaos, of crisis, of vulnerability. Each of us likely knows what it is like to be awake in the middle of the night, tossed by anxiety and doubt. Each of us likely knows what it is like to face the future and wonder if there is anything to hold onto... wonder if gravity will ever return.

I wonder if we sense that even as a church sometimes. As BMPC, or as Presbyterians, or as Mainline Christians in the United States... Those times when we sense our church ravaged by unpredictable storms, sense ourselves careening anchorless through this time and culture. Our buildings can seem so sturdy and strong, yet we sense all around us our numbers dwindling, we sense a creeping in of the unfamiliar, the unpredictable. Our ship walls seem sure, but we wonder... is the bottom falling out from under us?

They say that each storm has a center, a region of weather where the skies clear, the pressure drops, and suddenly everything becomes calm. The eye of the storm, where you remain surrounded on all sides by wind and rain, but where in that center, in that moment, in the midst of chaos – things become eerily clear.

At the center of our story today, we meet Peter on the edge of this helpless boat. He looks out across the water and a ghost is walking the boat's way. And the ghost says "I am" and says "do not be afraid". And as things come into focus, as the disciples enter the eye of the storm, Peter asks something amazing. I love this moment of our story. This question that Peter asks. In the midst of this crisis, Peter wonders if this man walking on water might indeed be his friend and rabbi Jesus. And in order to know if it *is* Jesus, what does Peter do? He says – "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water". Peter looks across at this ghost who claims to be Christ, who claims to be the great I AM, and Peter thinks – he will only know that this ghost is his Lord if the ghost commands him to do... the impossible. To come to him on the water.

And Jesus doesn't say back, 'no, no Peter – you stay safe! Stay in that boat!' No, Jesus says... 'come'.

I love this gutsy Peter. This Peter in the eye of the storm. This Peter who in one extreme moment, surrounded by chaos, sees so clearly across the water. Sees that in that moment, he can be called to defy gravity. The rules don't apply. Nothing can be counted on, so maybe just maybe he can overcome nature. I love this daring Peter

who recognizes his Lord only when that ghost challenges him to come... challenges him to come to God, even in the middle of the torrent and the wind and the rain. I love this Peter who shouts across the water to God – who shouts in the center of this torturing storm “make me do something great, God! Command me to make my life *mean* something! Command me to beat the odds, to ignore the crippling chaos around me. Command me to come *to you!*”

Walter Breuggemann says, “the prayer of faith arises exactly in the midst of chaos”.¹ In the eye of this storm, Peter has a prayer of faith, a plea to Christ, a kind of revelation.

And I wonder... I wonder if like the sandstorm crisis, this revelation doesn't also sound familiar. This prayer that arises exactly in the midst of chaos. Maybe we have had similar faith moments... when we're being tossed in the air, blinded by sand, yet somehow suddenly see God so very clearly. Those extreme situations, when life's rules no longer apply, so it seems possible, maybe just possible, that we could come to Christ. That we, like Peter, could walk on water. That we could make our lives *mean* something. Those times of extreme unpredictability where we turn to God. We make promises to God. Those moments when we recognize a ghost in front of us as none other than our Lord, beckoning us 'come.'

Perhaps we are in such a moment this morning. Suspended in this one hour of time, making promises to God and to one another. Suspended in this eye of life's storm, seeing Christ's call so clearly in our lives. Or maybe in the lives of these three children. Hearing the Lord beckon William, William, and Liam to live a life

¹ Walter Breuggemann, *The Threat of Life: Sermons on Pain, Power, and Weakness* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 99.

following him. Hearing Christ say 'dare to come, dare to defy the rules, to go against the easy norms and against the world's chaos, dare to walk on water and follow me'. Perhaps we find ourselves whipped by waters of threat, yet somehow this one hour, this one Sunday, we remember or imagine our own baptisms by waters of life. We remember our own experience of Christ's command to 'come.'

Caught in the eye of the storm, Peter begins to follow Christ's command. He does it! He walks on water! But of course, the eye begins to pass. The moment is, indeed, momentary and the storm overtakes him again. He notices the strong wind, his moment suspended in calm ends, he starts to sink. Chaos once again threatens to drown Peter. He once again is whipped into the unpredictable wiles of nature.

The next part of our Gospel story today may be the more familiar part for you. The part where Jesus saves Peter from the chaos of the water. The part where Jesus asks him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" This is the part where maybe we have felt a little ashamed to relate too wholeheartedly with Peter. The part where we are told not to doubt, just to trust... But of course we know this sinking Peter so very intimately. We, like Peter, may experience eye-of-the-storm moments of clarity. But we, like Peter, almost certainly experience the return of vulnerability sinking.

No one escapes the reality of deep waters. No one skips miraculously to Jesus, walking on water the whole way. Our faith journeys, our life journeys... we know they aren't easy. There will be moments of doubt amid the chaos, not only moments of clarity. We will inevitably encounter failure in our attempts to come to Christ.

As often as we lift up Peter's sinking as the moment he failed a test, I wonder... I wonder if the true test of Peter never was that attempt to walk on water. The chaos was always going to be too powerful for Peter alone. They were, after all, in the middle of a raging storm. I wonder if the true test may have come once the storm died down. Once the torture of the wind and rain abated...

In Nancy's analogy of the sandstorm, the family in crisis is so overwhelmed by the surrounding chaos that they cannot see what she sees. In the midst of the storm, it is impossible for them to believe what Nancy has come to know through crisis after crisis. What Nancy knows is that the whipping sand, it eventually falls back to the ground. The dust settles. Gravity takes hold. The old patterns re-emerge. Morning comes. You get hungry. You get thirsty. You face reality. Night comes. Morning comes. You put one foot in front of the other. You begin to see a future again.

The disciples eventually return to shore. Peter once again walks on solid ground. We regain a sense of regularity. A sense of control over our world.

And what then? What of the eye-of-the-storm revelations? The promises? What of the extreme clarity? What of that ghost who turned out to be a miracle-worker? When we are not suspended in mid-air, when gravity once again applies... what do we make of those rule-defying encounters with God?

In many crises, Nancy's knowledge that things will settle is indeed comforting. In others, such predictions might be warning signs. Warnings that the old patterns of abuse, of complacency, of brotherly jealousy will never quite be shaken.

There are times when a return to normalcy is truly God's blessing. But there may also be times when normalcy becomes a place where it is all-too easy to forget. To forget that water does not always come on cue. To forget that ultimately the world is not under our control. To forget that Christ offers us an opportunity to do something amazing, to come to him.

Indeed, as much as we may relate to Peter's rollercoaster of experiences in this story, ultimately this story isn't about Peter. It's about Jesus. It's about a Christ who defies gravity. A Christ who offers a steady hand. A Christ who reminds us that our lives already *do* mean something, for they belong to him. A Christ who offers peace and comfort. A God who meets us in life's storms and accompanies us, challenges us, and ultimately saves us. A God who is in control, and chooses words of comfort over powers of crisis.

In Isaiah, God says, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; And through the river, they shall not overwhelm you." In Matthew, Jesus walks on chaos and says "take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid."

Whether you find yourself swept up in a sandstorm, falling back into the rut of every day normalcy, or somewhere in between... take heart. Christ is Lord. Do not be afraid.

Amen.