

Here's My Hand
Genesis 37: 1-4, 12-28 and Matthew 14: 22-33
Eastminster Presbyterian Church
August 9, 2020

We know from last week's reading we know as the feeding of the 5,000, that it has already been a long day. Jesus and the disciples were trying to find a little peace and quiet, some solitude. But the crowds pursued Jesus from behind—and in front of him, people-everywhere, looking for healing, longing for hope. The tired disciples could turn them away, but Jesus could not. He knows there is need for spiritual food and for food to fill the stomach. Jesus took what was given him...5 loaves and 2 fish...blessed them, broke the bread and gave them to his disciples and in turn, the disciples gave to...5,000 men and no telling how many women and children. That, in anybody's book, is a good day's work!

So, picking up with the story today, it is no surprise that Jesus wants the disciples go on ahead of him. The Greek word used here, *enankasen*, means compels. It reveals a forcefulness on Jesus' part, but a comforting compelling for sure. Jesus senses the disciples' weariness, but knows the crowd still hunger for what he can offer. So, he sends the disciples on. He stays and prays in what literally turns out to be the calm before the storm.

In the boat, in the middle of the sea, the wind and waves kick up. The disciples are not in the best spot and the long day just got longer.

What would you do? Exhausted, you find yourself about three miles out in the sea, interestingly, that is about the middle of that body of water. So, they are stuck in the middle! It is the fourth watch, making it somewhere around 3:00 to 6:00 in the morning. The waves are battering you and the boat and through the misty sprays of water, something, someone is walking across the water—three miles out—in the middle of the night?

I suspect I would do exactly what the disciples did. Yell, "Ghost!" But what makes this more intense is their belief that this is definitive not Casper the friendly ghost. During Jesus' time, the sea was often considered the haunted home for all the demonic forces that were fighting against God. These disciples are men of the sea. Storms are part of their lives; but a ghost, an evil spirit, now there is a reason to be frightened!

And Peter, being Peter, voices that fear for all of them. The gospels of Mark and John talk only about Jesus and his calming of the storm. Luke does not bother to include the story at all. And, only here, in Matthew, is the disciple called by name, Peter. And only here is God called by name, *EGO EIMI*, the Greek word for I AM. The God of Moses, the great I AM, who says, come close to the burning bush, do not be afraid, tells Peter, come on, get out of the boat, do not be frightened.

So, Peter ventures out on the surface of the water. It could have been any of the disciples, but the story calls us to dive deeper instead of skimming the surface of the sea. Matthew is making a point. Peter is the risk-taker. He is the first disciple called. He is the only disciple whose tongue is not tied in knots when Jesus is seen talking with long-gone Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration. Jesus calls Peter the Rock, then he calls him Satan. Peter boasts that he will never deny Jesus, but he cannot even stay awake to watch out for this Lord while he prays. Getting the picture? Peter MUST be named in this story; he must be the one called by Jesus to walk on the water; he must be the one who sinks. Peter is the one who always takes risks, who steps out in faith, who stumbles when he tries to walk alone, but he is also the one always willing to reach out to a hand offering help.

Peter must appear in one of these gospels because Peter is like us; he is one minute full of faith, the next fear. He is one minute talking the Jesus talk; the next asking, Jesus who? He is a follower who deserves God's judgment but is given the gift of grace in Jesus Christ. Peter is like you and like me.

So, on the surface, this is a story about you and me. But, if we dive a little deeper, swim against the current, and like Peter, boldly go where no one expects us to go, then we find out this story has richer meaning as does all of God's Word.

In its larger context, this is the story of the church during Matthew's time. It is the story of the church of our time. By the time the gospel writer penned this water-walking story, any hand reaching out to rescue a doubting believer or a sinking church truly would have seen a ghost. Jesus was gone, descended into heaven. The Christians were being persecuted. Those left behind were finding it increasingly more difficult to share the story of Jesus' love when people all around were asking, "So where is he, this healer of the sick? When can I meet this one who causes wind and waves to calm?"

In the end, the disciples call Jesus by name, they claim his Lordship over the wind and waves. "This is the Son of God they proclaim!" And that is the diving deeper. This is more than a story about us and how little or much faith we have; this is a story about knowing and acting upon our belief that Jesus, our Lord has faith in us.

We are all together, situated in a perfectly good boat, Christ's church, not ours. We have been given beautiful feet to carry the good news to others, and guess what? We can do that by stepping out of the boat; and we can do that by staying in the boat.

Scripture is full of risk-takers, faith-leapers, water-walkers, people who are willing to get out of the comfort of the boat to share salvation's story to sinking sinners. But, just as Jesus always comes back to seek the will and wisdom of God, this story compels us to keep returning to the boat, coming back to Christ's church to be filled with a faith that calls us back out again. When we look at the whole of Matthew's gospel, the message is clearly focused on community. As people of faith, we might find ourselves in different boats, but we are all facing the same storm, the grip of sin that tries to separate us from the love of God in Christ.

During this pandemic, I keep hearing a similar phrase, and our world being what it is, a phrase seen in two different lights. The phrase: we are in this together. The counter: no, we are not. As witnesses to the faithfulness of God, I urge us to remember that, no we are not all in the same boat, but we are all fighting the same thing, a virus. The virus could care less who it targets, but we, risk-takers, faith-leapers and water-walkers need to stop targeting one another and place our focus and put our trust in a grace-filled Lord who calls us to be community in and out of the proverbial boat. Our oneness comes from professing Jesus as our Lord, whether we are standing safely on the shoreline or wafting in the middle of the sea. Our Lord's arms of hope are long enough and strong enough to reach us.

And, if we are still having any doubts about God's grace for all, then all we need do is look to the Old Testament story today. What humans did out of the sins of jealousy and greed, turning brother against brother (or in the case of the church and world today, brothers and sisters in Christ against one another) even then, God ultimately works good and offers gracious forgiveness and reconciliation.

We must be honest. Being church together is not always a fun fishing trip and the world beyond the church is a big mess. But, situated there, in the middle of the mess, like the middle of the churning sea, we always find the one who reaches out and says, "Come!"

But Jesus and Peter do not stay on the water, do they? They come back to the boat. If we have ears to hear, Jesus is telling us that risk-taking, faith-leaping, water-walking is an essential part of our faith journey, but so also is returning to, remaining in, rejoicing for a community of faith that reminds us, when we most need it, that our trust, more than a task is what the Lord seeks from us, least we begin to believe more in our abilities than God's provisions for our lives.

Reaching out to the hand always extended to us by our Lord gives strength for the feet to move across the waters of the world, offering the invitation and the hope of Jesus who says, "Come!"

To the one who is the great I AM, who pulls us from raging waters and water-less pits...may our faithful response be, "Here's my hand." Amen.