

HOLY STORIES
SERMON PREACHED ON MATTHEW 14:22-33
WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, BUFFALO NY
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I had the good fortune to spend this last month at our family cottage on Findley Lake, a tiny lake tucked into the corner of New York State. It was a perfect month for a news fast –I seldom saw a headline; I didn't listen to NPR; and I didn't watch the news. It was a delightful news free month in every way. I got in the car on Monday to come home and turned on the radio to get caught up on world events. After a month of no news, it's hard to describe the impact of the stories I heard.

In case you have been on a news fast, I am sorry to be the one to tell you that things are not going well here. The stock market continues to plummet; CEOs and priests disappoint; violence and death and reprisal continue in the Middle East; we seem to be heading toward war with Iraq and it's not so good in Afghanistan either. New ecological dangers threaten our well being. Locally, the news isn't much better. Buffalo is reeling again from racial tensions, the lake's long-term health is at stake, and there's a move afoot to recall the mayor. I'll tell you, it was almost enough to send a person right back to the cottage. I felt helpless and could feel myself literally sinking into the darkness of it all. These stories grab our attention and do not want to let us go. That's why I have been so glad to have this morning's story nudge me all week, this story of Peter and the disciples at sea.

Here they are. The disciples are absolutely beat. They have spent the day being pressed by a very large crowd of poor and sick and desperate people. They have just finished serving more than 5,000 people a banquet made from a few loaves and fishes. I don't know about you, but I have served a few church suppers myself, and while I find them exhilarating, they are exhausting. So we can understand that the disciples are tired and a bit ragged. And so is Jesus, who, Matthew says, immediately sends the disciples ahead by boat so that he might spend some time by himself in prayer.

Now when Matthew begins a story with 'immediately', we know something big and important is going to happen. It's one of his ways of getting our attention. The wind comes up; the disciples are battered by waves and wind; and they are blown quite far from shore into the middle of the sea and the middle of a storm. They've spent a sleepless night after an exhausting day rowing against the wind, bailing water, getting nowhere, and they are now in that loneliest time of night just before dawn. Out of weary and anxious eyes, they are startled- no, they are terrified- by what they see. Jesus assures them. He is no ghost.

Then Peter asks a question- the very same question that the tempter had asked in the wilderness, a testing kind of question: "If it is really you, make me walk across the water." Jesus responds, but not like he did with the tempter. He says what he

does to all his followers, ‘come.’ Jesus invites Peter to stroll across the water- which Peter does until he takes his eyes off Jesus, begins to notice the wind and the wave, scares himself silly and starts to sink. *He takes his eyes off Jesus and sinks.* He calls out to Jesus again – this time, it’s a prayer of “save me.” Jesus responds again, reaching out his hand to catch him, all the while shaking his head and wondering aloud why Peter tests, why Peter doubts. They climb into the boat, the winds die down and the disciples, breathless with awe, say with a hushed and reverent tone: “Truly, you are the Son of God.” And they row silently and easily toward shore.

Such a story. Did this really happen? Is this just telling tales? Could it happen again? We want to understand. How did they walk on water? Was there a sandbar in the sea? Did the night sky and sleep deprived minds play tricks on their sight? Is this a post resurrection story plunked smack dab in the middle of Matthew’s gospel? Must we explain it, or can we just say that the ancient worldview included miracles, but not science as we know it? ⁱ If it’s not factual, can this story still say something true, something important about God, about discipleship, something to hearten weary souls, then and now?

There are a couple of things we can say. We can say that the sea symbolized chaos for the ancients. Matthew locates the story in the middle of a chaotic and stormy sea, because that’s where the early church found itself- persecuted, battered about by the Roman Empire. We can say that the story heartened the first Christians with the central truth that God is present with disciples in the midst of storms, and that it’s quite possible for God to do the last thing we ever expected, and with God’s help, we can do the last thing we ever expected. This is a holy story, and holy stories hearten us, strengthen us; they lift us up out of darkness; they remind us of the promise of God’s presence and activity even here, even now.

I’d like to tell you a contemporary story, from the World Trade Tower event of September 11, now 11 months ago, told to me by the man who experienced it. He tells it, in fact, in the hushed and reverent tone of a disciple who still can’t quite believe what he saw, and I retell it with his permission.

Our friend is head of a large investment firm that was housed on the 42nd floor of the South Tower, the second of the Trade Tower buildings to be hit. He saw a reflection of what looked like a huge fire in the North Tower and immediately decided to evacuate his office, an office of more than 200 employees. He led them quickly to the nearest stairwell, which was free and clear. They moved swiftly and urgently down the flights. When they reached the fifth floor they were faced with several options and no clear sense of which way to go. They were at an impasse of sorts. As our friend hesitated, suddenly a man in blue coveralls appeared to be coming toward him on his right. And he says *suddenly* in the way that Matthew says immediately, because this band of 200 folks had walked down 37 flights of stairs and this man had at no time been part of their group. The man moved up to his side and said, “follow me, I’ll show you the way.” *“Follow me, I’ll show you the way.”* Which our friend did, leading his office staff and following the man in the coveralls up one

flight of stairs and over to another stairwell that took them down to the street and away from the buildings which were now throwing off paper and ash and desperate people. Once away from the building, he looked around for the man to say thank you – and never saw him again.

To this day, says our friend, he does not pass a church without going inside and lighting a candle. Now I don't know exactly what kind of prayer he offers – perhaps something like thank you, or a variation on 'truly, you are the Son of God'. And like the disciple Matthew, he does not miss a chance to tell this holy story of God's good and miraculous presence in his life, of God's striding toward them and leading them out of danger, out of confusion, out of darkness, and into a new life of thanksgiving. That, my friends, is exactly what the psalmist urges in the psalm we heard this morning. We are to give thanks, seek God, and remember by telling the good news in this morning's story. Remembering helps us keep our eyes on God.

- We *must* keep our eyes on our God who does the most inexplicable thing. It's not that Jesus walked on water, but that Jesus walked right toward them and did not pass them by - those disciples who doubt and test.
- We *must* keep our eyes on God who created the sea and land, storm and calm, women and men, fish and wheat, dragonflies, tall pines and peonies.
- We *must* keep our eyes on God who walked not only on water, but right into our history in the person of Jesus Christ to extend a hand, to climb right into our battered boats, to calm our seas, to bring us peace, to teach us to feed one another and to teach us to trust our God.
- Yes, we *must* keep our eyes on God who, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, is at work right now, right here, in the *extraordinary* arrival of a man in blue coveralls, and in the *ordinary* activity of a friend who brings us soup, in an *ordinary* community of Christians who work for justice. God is at work in you and me, as ordinary as we may be.

This is what holy stories do for us. They hearten and strengthen us. They remind us of the promise of God's presence and activity anytime we witness someone who loves enough to risk their own comfort, even their own security for the sake of others.

We must not take our eyes off this good news lest we scare ourselves silly and begin to sink. We must not take our eyes off this good news because goodness knows, we need it as much today as those first Christians. Perhaps we have never needed it more than in a post 9/11 world that is dark with violence, where many wonder where God is at all. We are called to name God's miraculous presence in and among us, to give thanks, and to remember by telling in what we say and what we do, *our very life becoming a holy story*.

There is work to be done. God calls us to be partners. God may be inviting you to slide out of your safe and comfortable space to help someone build a home or a new life. God may be inviting you to increase your pledge or your commitment to peace. God may be calling you to invite someone to church to hear this good news or invite a lonely someone to your home for a meal. Perhaps you are called to send a letter of cheer or a letter of protest. Perhaps you are called to do something about the income gap right in your workplace or doing some reconciling right under your own roof.

I don't know exactly what will be right for you, but I do know that God has gifted you with all that you need to live out your holy story. I don't know exactly what needs to be done in Iraq or Afghanistan, for the West Nile virus, but I do know that God rules over chaos. I do know that God invites us even now, with the word offered to Peter, "come." Come and do the last thing you ever expected, for Jesus sake. Amen.

ⁱ Ibid. M. Eugene Boring. New Interpreter's Bible. (Nashville:Abingdon:1995). 246.