

09 August 2020: Matthew 14:22-33 (Proper 14)

Twenty years ago, a friend and I were on a pontoon boat fishing on Lake Keowee, South Carolina, when a sudden storm arose. After we noticed the dark clouds rolling in, we had about five minutes before it struck; unfortunately, the dock was 20 minutes away. It was a harrowing experience: the strong winds drove the heavy rain sideways, the roaring waters, the booming thunder and too-close lightning—I admit I was scared. My slight experience that day comes to mind when I hear of the Disciples' storm.

You have likely heard preachers portray Peter as an impetuous, bumbling loudmouth, good intentioned but none-too-bright. Often preachers tell us that if Jesus could choose and love a nincompoop like Peter, there is hope for us. Jesus *does* choose and love nincompoops, I offer myself as evidence, but that is not the point.

Peter is more than a clueless bungler. During a terrible storm Jesus came to them across the water; I can imagine their terror; all except Peter who—on hearing Jesus' voice—asks to be with him. When out of the boat, like any sane person he experiences the storm in a very personal way and loses courage. When Jesus observes—"Peter, your faith is too small"—Peter does not defend himself, make excuses or appeal to the laws of physics; he asks for and accepts Jesus' help and is brought through the storm. Peter exemplifies the way to be in relationship with Jesus.

First, and this congregation has all-too-vivid experience, Jesus brings us through the storms. Indeed, we often perceive God's presence, mercy, and grace more vividly in the storms than in the calm. Admittedly we generally perceive this after the storm passes. Yet with practice, we can begin to know it *during* the storms. Therefore, in this way only, the storms of our lives are blessings that bring us into the grasp of Jesus. God does not inflict the storms on us; God can use the storms for our salvation.

Another truth: fear is real but not as real as Jesus saving us. Life is dangerous, storms are real, tragedy, wounds and loss inflict us all. Yet whatever life brings, nothing is as powerful as Jesus' love for us, and His desire to save us. With Jesus, we can weather life's storms. We may be wounded, we likely will be changed, at some point we will die; yet we will surely be saved.

One of the biggest differences I have noticed among people of faith involves the storms. There are those who concentrate quite exclusively on the storms. They are rather like Weather Channel reporters, wanting to provide seemingly endless details about the storm's severity, its origins, real and anticipated damage, and the tragic aftermath. There are others who, while acknowledging the presence of storms are more focused on the ways to be safe, to come through the storm, to triumph despite the storm. Obviously, I hold that focusing on Jesus-who-saves is of more use than fixation on the storms that destroy.

Here is another truth: no one's faith is strong enough to save them. Salvation is Jesus' work in us not something we accomplish. Simply admit incomplete faith. As we read in Mark 9:24: "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief." Do not worry if you have faith 'enough,' and never speculate on 'how much' faith you or anyone else has. Jesus tells us that even mustard-seed faith is enough (Matthew 17:20). If Peter's experience in the storm teaches us anything, it is that fear and faith need not be incompatible.

Lastly, we are going to get wet. When the storm on Lake Keowee passed my friend and I were soaked through. Peter was surely drenched. Christians who think they can rise above the tragedies of life unscathed are guilty of wishful thinking, victims of a pernicious lie, or simply immature. Indeed, followers of Jesus open themselves to be *more* effected by life's storms, not less. Can it be otherwise if we begin to experience life from God's boundless, merciful perspective rather than our cramped, small perspectives. If God's intention for the universe is salvation (John 3:16), if God desires no one's condemnation but that all turn to him and are saved (I Timothy 2:4), are not destructive choices, wasted lives, pernicious violence, helpless suffering and senseless death even more heartbreaking? Yet we hope in Jesus whose forgiveness is boundless, whose mercy is endless, whose loving kindness will heal and restore.

Peter got out of the boat: So, too, should we. And whether afraid or not, Jesus is in the storm to save us, and everyone. Amen.