

Pentecost 9, Proper 14
Matthew 14:22-33

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Jesus told the disciples to “go on ahead to the other side.” On their way across the Sea of Galilee, they encountered a storm. The disciples were frightened. They were in an open fishing boat, it was night, and the storm raged around them. St. Matthew paints such a vivid image for us of this scene. I think we can easily imagine the fright of the disciples, the terror at seeing what they first think is a ghost, then the relief at seeing it is Jesus –then the amazement of Peter as he realized that Jesus was walking on water; Peter’s trust in Jesus to have him walk on water too; Peter’s fright as he began to sink when he focused on the howling wind. Jesus reached out to Peter and took his hand, lifting him back up to walk with him. Then getting into the boat, Jesus calmed the storm. With this scene, Matthew has boiled the whole of the New Testament, the Good News, the foundation of our faith in this one man, into a summation. We are all in the same boat and have the same fears as life pitches us like a storm; Jesus is not like us or anyone before him. He did things that were simply miraculous by the power of God. We know it is the power of God because even the forces of nature bow to His will. Jesus comes to save. He got into the boat with his disciples. He is not afraid of the storm because he knows the will of the Father and it is forgiveness, peace, and eternal life –there is nothing to fear. And Jesus in the boat with us equates with forgiveness, peace, and life. We can take this short story as a microcosm of the story of Emmanuel, of “God with us.”

We can also see it as not an entirely new story – it is really part of a larger story that began in Genesis, with God beginning to create the universe and our world. The writers who formed the text of Genesis took their observances about the natural world and the relationship of creation and man with the Creator. “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” (Gen 1:1-2) Old Testament scholar and theologian Walter Brueggemann points out that “...the waters, the darkness, and the wind are discrete realities – the “stuff” that God uses to bring about a new order...” (p.48, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*) The Hebrews had observed that the power that God had woven into creation bursts forth, as land and sea are constantly in a state of upheaval: volcanoes, earthquakes, and storms. The mystery of the depth and vastness and unpredictability of the sea captured their imagination. Water impacted their world and became a symbol of their frailty.

The deep and raging waters figure at other points in the Hebrew scripture when God is changing the world. Remember the flood and Noah? Water “becomes the instrument of destruction ...a return to the watery chaos (Ibid, p.60.)” Remember the parting of the Red Sea and then the parting of the river Jordan as God led his people out of bondage and into a new homeland? The feet of the people of Israel were dry after each crossing! The waters that could drown become the way God shows his glory as He saves his people and fulfills his promises. The waters that represent chaos become the way to Freedom. In the Old Testament, God commands water to do His will, each time setting in motion new order for the world.

This brings us back to the castaways and their plight in the small boat on the turbulent waters, out of sight of land, and terrified. Their situation was an existential crisis. An existential crisis: Have you had any of those lately? I certainly have. This feels like a summer that has actually had a meaty news cycle – there are crises in motion around the world which affect us in the global stage and at home: Ukraine, Russia, Israel, Boko Haran, gangs in Central America... This week I have been hearing more news about the situation in northern Iraq with the Islamic State fanatics, who are on a genocidal rampage against any group not worshipping as they do: minority sects of Islam, Christians, and the Yazidis. The Yazidis are of particular concern this week because it was learned by the international press that tens of thousands have been surrounded by the army of extremist jihadists and trapped on a mountain in the high desert in Northern Iraq. The Guardian reported Friday that, “UN groups say at least 40,000 members of the Yazidi sect, many of them women and children, have taken refuge in nine locations on Mount Sinjar, a craggy, mile-high ridge identified in local legend as the final resting place of Noah's ark.” There is no water, no foliage for shelter from the desert sun, no provisions and the images are grim as the most helpless, the very young and the elderly succumb to the harsh environment. The Yazidis are unarmed and literally have become trophies as the hunters pose, thumbs up, one foot on the pile of carcasses and smiling for the camera. I am feeling like this may be the tipping point – there may be as many as 50,000

men fighting in this crazed militia. The waters of war are rising. That the Yazidis are stranded where many people believe that Noah's ark landed, that this is all happening where a great flood covered the land around 3,000 years ago and the Hebrews found a new theological understanding about God and man – it breaks my heart. The flood waters are rising all around the world in the form of humans destroying and breaking and laying waste. Yes, I am feeling an existential crisis coming on. It feels we are coming into a time in history that we haven't seen the likes of since the first Allied soldiers entered the camps and discovered what the Nazi "Final Solution" was all about. Our boat is definitely being tossed by a massive storm.

I know that I do not need to throw any of you into an existential crisis. If you aren't in one already, you have faced them in the past and are going to face them in the future. I spent ten years doing the required academics, internships, and spiritual discernment to get ordained. I have been ordained for just over two years. It didn't take long to realize that the four months I spent doing Clinical Pastoral Education, my time of acting as a chaplain at Goodwin House, was the singularly most important time of formation and preparation for parish life. I learned the skill of being mindful, of the power of presence, and of prayerful response to crisis. As part of a way to describe the life of our parish and the impact of our many ministries, the stewardship committee has asked the clergy to think of my typical work week and to make a pie chart of what I do with my time at Grace. (That has been a mini existential crisis in itself.) I do know what the largest wedge of my pie chart will be: pastoral care. A large part of being a priest is walking alongside folk as they face their crises or existential challenges or transitions in life, both good and bad. Happy times and hard times bring us face to face with the great "why?"

Why have I been so blessed? Why have I suffered this loss? Why am I in pain and ill? Why? Unfortunately, if I have claimed anything other than "I do not know," then I have failed you. Dear friends, there is no "why" it just "is." The deep questions of life are not like "Why did I get shocked? Easy: because you stuck your finger in the socket. Don't do that." The deep questions are more like, "You have just had a baby, and it is beautiful and unique and a whole new creation. Why? I don't know but praise God!" You have just lost someone you loved. "Why did this happen? I do not know. Let me pray with you, Lord have mercy." For both, I am here with you in this boat and pointing to the love and abiding presence of Christ. As your priest, that is what I do. Whether you are in the bright sun or the storm, my role is to be one who points out the presence of the divine in the midst of it all. My role is to help you find Christ and strengthen your faith so you will point the way for others also. Fr. Malm, in his sermon for Bernie Schroeder's ordination to the diaconate, quoted somebody and I have been unable to find the particular reference – but I do not think it matters who said it but that it was said, because it has stuck with me each day since I heard it. If you missed it during the sermon that day or if you were not present, here is what has been echoing in my brain for over a week: that our Christian faith is not something that we explain, like science. Rather, our faith is an encounter with Christ that is *experienced* (paraphrase of Malm, 08/02/14.) This story of the disciples in their boat and their encounter with Jesus is how I think our community of faith works, the encounter we have with Christ. The world at times can feel like a storm, tossing us about and scaring us, bringing up our deepest fears about life and death. Like Peter, we might suddenly focus on the wind and lose sight of Jesus. We might suddenly doubt the faith that propelled us out of the boat and sent us walking like our Lord on the water, and begin to sink. The chaos of the world is real and so powerful it can drag us under. The encounter I want you to consider today is the moment when the disciples moved and made room to receive not only Peter, but also Jesus, into their boat. The moment when the storm suddenly disappeared and the waters calmed. The scripture reads, "Those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." The disciples encountered the power of God among them. They encountered the peace of Christ in their midst. On the Sea of Galilee that night, God revealed himself in a new way, as in the Flood, as through the Nile, and as across the Jordan, This time God worked a new order for the world on the Sea of Galilee in a small fishing boat: Telling us through Christ, "I am with you and I calm the storm." As Matthew recorded Jesus saying, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." As a community we remind one another of this story and we join one another in welcoming Jesus into our midst. We learn to trust him to calm the storms of the world for us. We "go on ahead" together, not fearing the next storm because we have encountered Christ with us and his peace. There will always be a next storm that will try to entangle us in sin and death. Together, in this boat, we find freedom from fear of the next storm because Christ is with us. Amen.