

SERMON: “Sailing Stories: Jesus Walks on Water.”

Rev. Geoff Ross: St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Brampton. Sunday, Aug 13, 2017

By now, those of you who have been here for the past few Sundays should be familiar with the notion of sailing stories in the Bible. With the Jonah story two weeks ago, we established the pattern from being lost at sea to the safety of a sheltered harbor, from crisis to conversion to salvation. With the story of the storm on the Sea of Galilee we caught a glimpse at the meaning of the metaphors: the Sea represents evil and chaos, the disciples fear represents our fear, the actions by Jesus represents the saving action of a loving and compassionate God – the ship even represents the church, complete with the cross as a mast. Not even sailing stories are simple affairs in the Bible!

Today's story is set between two preaching/teaching events where Jesus feeds and teaches thousands of people. The scene is much like the story we heard last week; Jesus instructs his disciples to set sail across the Sea at night – only this time Jesus doesn't go with them, choosing instead to be alone to pray. While He is praying the disciple's boat is caught in a violent storm. Then, just as the disciples' hope falters, Jesus appears, walking on the water, in the midst of the storm. [Reading: Matthew 14:22-33 p. 823]

In a story that obviously parallels the coming dark nights of fear and chaotic helplessness after Jesus' crucifixion, the disciples – the present and future leaders of the Church built upon the Body of Christ – are lost and adrift and Jesus comes to them and reassures them of his eternal presence and calms the storm that rages about them. Seen this way this is a story about the Church (Ship/Metaphor for Church): but at its core, it is a story about fear and faith.

With echoes of last week's stormy sailing story this story differs in that the disciple's panic in the face of the storm is made worse by the fact that Jesus is not on board – they are alone on the roiling Sea on a dark and stormy night. Again, we can hear their cries, imagine their frantic actions, and feel their desperation as their skills fail against the power of the storm. Terrified, the disciples are so blinded by despair they don't even recognize Jesus as He walks across the water toward them. [Adlib: Dunkirk movie/drowning/trapped/helpless/hopeless] it is into this that Jesus, repeating what God's been saying to us since the beginning, says, *“Don't worry! It's me. Don't be afraid.”*

Now, why do you suppose Jesus says this? I think it's because Jesus knew they were afraid – not necessarily of Him, but of having no hope/being caught up in despair. God/Jesus knows that fear is corrosive; it erodes faith, destroys trust, undermines confidence, and it wrecks hope. As Peter experiences, nothing can sink us faster than fear because fear is insidious; it can reduce and diminish us. It crumbles the foundations of our lives, making us doubt what we are sure of – dissolving confidence, turning certainty into uncertainty, dissipating our courage until we're drowning. And He still says this because we're still afraid.

And who here isn't? There's a world of things that are beyond our control – with seemingly more added to the list, both out there and in here everyday. Then there are the things we can control but let slip, slide, or drift away until they collect like so much debris – the detritus of broken promises, schemes, hopes/dreams – weighing us down, pulling us under. Who here isn't somehow a shipwrecked soul? After all, we're human; it's in our fallen nature. Despite what we fool ourselves into thinking, we're not the masters of our own domain/destinies; we're not the ones who are in control. The moment we think/act/believe this original sin is the moment we sink, washed down by waves of regret. But this isn't the end of the story.

Did you notice the disciples' responses? Just as we did in last week's story, in the midst of the storm, we see the disciples oscillate between fear and faith, despair and confident hope – specifically through Peter. Even Peter – the 'rock' on which Jesus will build His Church, the 1st leader of the Church – lives between the waves of fear and faith; initially afraid, he steps out in faith/gets out of the boat, but again his fears undo him. At once Peter is the best/worst of us – feeling exultation of faith's power and the hopelessness of being swamped by our doubts/fears – in desperation he calls out for salvation. And Jesus rescues him – while questioning his (and the disciple's) faith.

The rebuke may seem harsh but it's not – like last week's question, it's modified by the display of grace found in Jesus' actions towards Peter, the disciples in the boat, and to us. The truth is, we have faith, but at best it's not enough. But the grace of God is that despite this God loves us and offers Jesus to enable/embolden our little faith so we too can make our confession of faith in God, and praise/worship God for our salvation. The good news of this story is that even in the tumult of the swirling nightmare of our storm tossed panic, Jesus is there reaching out to us. The good news is that when we cry out – when we reach out to be rescued/saved – God's hand is already there. Like sailors, caught in a storm, we're lost at Sea – slipping beneath the waves, gasping and grasping for love, for God in Jesus, to rescue us: the good news is that through faith God already has. And that is a cause to say, *“truly Jesus is the Son of God!”* Amen.