

7/12/2020

Matthew 14:22-33

²² Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. ²³ After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone, ²⁴ and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

²⁵ Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. ²⁶ When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear.

²⁷ But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

²⁸ "Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water."

²⁹ "Come," he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!"

³¹ Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?"

³² And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. ³³ Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

In the Storm

This scripture passage is a special one to me. A year ago on July 7th, you and I worshipped together for the first time and this passage from Matthew was the text we focused on that day. Do you remember? I sure do. I was nervous as all get out. I had little idea of what to expect from being your pastor, let alone a pastor, altogether. And now, I can't believe it's been a whole year since we were first introduced to each other. This year has flown by!

When we looked at this story about Jesus and his disciples last year, I spoke about how this actual, physical storm in Matthew's Gospel can connect to us with the transition you and I were facing together. As we were beginning a new season of Asbury's history, I hoped and prayed that we could step out of the boat together, keeping our eyes on Jesus, even in the midst of the wind and waves of transition...But little did we know what kind of storm would come between July 2019 and July 2020, right? The landscape of our individual lives might look completely different for some of us. Perhaps you were laid off for a time or lost your job, maybe you had your kids or grandkids home because school was out, maybe you've lost a loved one during this time, so many of us are missing our family and friends who are still being quarantined in nursing homes. The list goes on and on, really. And not only has so much changed for us individually, our entire collective culture has changed. We've all heard the jokes about how store clerks used to be alarmed when someone would come in with a face mask, and now they're alarmed when someone comes in their store without one! We don't know if people are smiling at us anymore when we pass them by in the store, at work, or on the street. We get counted entering and exiting public places. So much of it is bizarre. Many of us have felt like we're living in a Twilight Zone...and rightly so. So much has changed. And then, on top of things changing for us personally, and us collectively, all of this change has *drastically* changed how we function as a church body. We're experiencing now those changes we've had to make for corporate Sunday worship, but we also aren't

sure how to do the work of the church anymore. So much of what we used to be and do just isn't practical right now.

All of these changes have brought so much upheaval into our lives – some of it welcomed, most of it not. And friends, I hate to say it, but I don't think we're going to get back to our old normal any time soon. We all know it...but it's hard to think about. Sometimes, when I think about how long we've been in this upheaval and how long we could possibly stay in it, it feels like a storm that will never end. From my own experience, I'm not very good at realizing that my current situation is not always going to be my current situation. Just ask Dustin – he knows how impatient I am. But, for probably all of us, especially in bad or scary situations, time seems to slow down...creating a feeling like, "This is never going to end. Is this how it's going to be forever?" And so I wonder if with every crashing wave and every strike of lightning and roll of thunder on the sea, if the disciples thought that this storm would never end.

If you'll allow me some vulnerability, I have to admit that when I reflect back to a year ago, while so much has gotten easier and better, I still feel a large sense of uncertainty because of how much is different. And so, as I reflected on this year, I was surprised to be drawn back to this scripture again at this time of year. But today, I have the opportunity to not only look forward with all of you, but I also get to look backward, too.

As I said, last year I hoped and prayed that we could step out of the boat, as Peter did in our Bible passage, and take the risk to walk on water *with* Jesus. I

hoped that we would step out together. And I prayed you and I would keep our eyes on Jesus. When I reflect on this year, I think that we've largely done just that, with the help of the Holy Spirit. We have held each other by the hand, stepped out in the middle of the storm, and have kept our eyes on Jesus. I have been eternally grateful for how this congregation has taken care of each other. I have been incredibly impressed that you all have kept on being good stewards of this church building and our staff members. I have been so excited about the moments when this church family has stepped up to do and pray for this community like our prayer vigil, the prayer walk, our knitters and crochet-ers have been busy preparing lots of prayer shawls, the food drive for the Waterford Food Pantry, the ramps that have been built in the sun while wearing face masks, the birthday and anniversary cards that have continued to be sent, the many phone calls, emails, and texts, the prayer chain, reading a chapter of scripture every day along with each other, our participation in drive thru communion with the Presbyterian Church. And I am thrilled that so many of you continued to worship at home when we were advised to not gather. While the church building was shut down, the people called the Church did not shut down. We have kept taking steps in the middle of our storm.

To be sure, we each individually do have moments or seasons when we might be subject to the same words Jesus said to Peter, "You of little faith. Why did you doubt?" But we also have the body of Christ, the church, to reach out and pick us up when we panic and begin to sink. Thanks be to God for the Body of

Christ. This is why I can look back over this, my first year here, with a massive sense of gratitude.

So, when we turn our gaze from the past year and look forward into the coming year, I'm surprised to be praying the exact same thing. I thought, this our second year together, would feel more settled than it does with all the current challenges. This year will have its own set of transitions, but I hope and pray again this year that you and I can, together, step out of the boat for Jesus (doing his work in this world), and keep our eyes set on him.

To that end, I'd like to ask you if you would be in prayer for our church and community as we continue in this new normal, specifically about ways we can continue to step out of the boat for Jesus. Are there new and different ways we could be serving our community in this season? Do you have ideas of how we can be taking care of one another in this congregation as we continue to be advised to keep a physical distance? How can this congregation be the church in new and different ways in the midst of this particular storm? Would you commit to praying that God would show us how to do that? Let's keep stepping out of the boat for Jesus, together.

In the middle of our current storm, it's easy to get discouraged and feel like this is never going to end. But really, while we might be in a particularly long and ugly one right now, we must remember that storms will continue to come. The real question is: How will we react to those storms? One of my favorite shows is *Downton Abbey* and there's a character named Violet Crawley, the Dowager

Countess on that show that always has the best lines. In one episode of Downton, the Countess said this, “All life is a series of problems which we must try and solve, first one and then the next and then the next, until at last we die.” Ok, ok, that might sound a bit grim, but the sentiment is there! Life really does present us with challenges, one right after the other. In fact, Jesus assured his disciples that trials would be a part of life when he said, “In this world you will have trouble.” But Jesus also said immediately after that promise, “But take heart, for I have overcome the world.” We worship the one who has overcome the world! In the middle of our storms, Jesus remains. This storm will, too, pass, but while we are in the midst of it, let’s continue to keep our eyes set on Jesus.

Let’s pray –

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the ways you have kept us afloat in this storm. Jesus, we thank you for drawing near to us even in the most uncertain times. We pray now that you continue to help us step out, to keep doing your work and your will, and help us to keep our eyes on you. Spirit, fill us with faith. Amen.