

He Saw The Wind

Matthew 14:22-33

August 13, 2017

First United Methodist Church, Lindstrom

(This is a manuscript prepared for sermon delivery and may not represent actual words spoken.)

But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!"

This incident takes place right after the feeding of the thousands...the miracle we looked at last week. We know it took place right after because the text says that immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and head to the other side of the sea. He did not request this of them...or invite them; he made them.

Okay...so I am going to remind us of something that was mentioned last week. Jesus and the disciples were on one side of the sea here. Jesus went there after he had heard that John the Baptist—his relative and forerunner—had been killed. Jesus went there alone. He went there because the Scripture says it was a solitary place. Thousands of people beat him to that spot. Jesus did not get to experience the solitude he desired. He healed the sick and fed them all.

So immediately after that, Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him. Jesus then dismissed the crowd. After he dismissed the crowd, Jesus then went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. So this text begins with Jesus finally getting the solitude he desired.

Now, if you don't mind, I would like to talk a little about floating and swimming. To do this I will need to begin with a physics lesson. You may want to fact check me. I did not do much studying in the sciences. I was more into arts and letters. And, yes, I do know this is church and not a science lab. Bear with me.

We know that anything that has a higher density than water will sink when it is put in water. A rock sinks. I am speaking very generally here...as one who is not as familiar with a topic usually does. I am in a bit over my head here. But

I do know water density varies based on things like temperature. Frozen H₂O is less dense than liquid H₂O. Ice floats. Salt water is more dense. But in the middle of summer in Minnesota a rock will sink when it is thrown into South Center Lake. It will sink because it is more dense. Our bodies are roughly two-thirds water. What this means—generally speaking—is we should be able to float on water.

I learned how to swim a long time ago. Took swimming lessons at the YMCA in St. Paul. The Y was within walking distance from my house. It was straight down the road from the capital building...kitty corner from the old Grants Department Store. I reminisce. I do recall my first lesson. The pool was ten feet deep in the deep end...I think three feet deep in the shallow end. We began in the shallow end of the pool.

The first thing we learned was simply how to float. The instructor, who was standing out of the pool, told us to put our arms out to our sides and just lean forward and let our feet kind of float up off the bottom. We were told we had to relax and just believe—trust—that we would float. Most of us were able to do that. But there were a couple of kids who just couldn't. Their feet would begin to float up...and they would start to flail their arms a bit...and stand up. The key was we had to relax and trust that we would float and we would be okay.

You know it is easier for a child to learn to swim than it is for an adult who does not know how to swim. Little children have that ability to relax and trust. I know some adults who cannot swim and who do not want to learn to swim. They do not believe they will just float.

A person who cannot swim and who is in over his/her head can be a risk to others trying to help them. The panic is such that they might pull

others under with them. A lifeguard must approach a drowning person from behind.

Have you ever felt like you were in over your head...in a bit of a panic? Boy...I sure have. Trust me.

Anyway, we have this Scripture text here. Peter thought he was going to drown. We know well most of the Gospel stories. We know this one. After the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go ahead to the other side of the lake. He compelled them. Jesus needed that time alone.

The boat carrying the disciples had made considerable progress. It was a ways out. A storm came up. The boat was being tossed by the waves because the wind was against the boat. They were heading into the wind. This would make any kind of progress a challenge.

It was between three and six in the morning. Jesus went to them. He walked on the water. Put yourself in that boat. You are struggling hard against a headwind. You are weary. Some would say the disciples were afraid. Maybe...just a little. But remember: several of them were fishermen. They had dealt with wind and waves before. Now, through the dark or—at best—pre-dawn mist, you see Jesus. Well...this is a new one here. You have seen Jesus heal the sick and all that. You just saw Jesus feed thousands. But this walking-on-water thing is something totally different. What do you think? It was at this point the disciples were afraid...terrified. They thought they were seeing a phantom...an apparition. They cried out in fear.

Jesus responded with three pithy statements. First, he said, "Take courage!" Second, he said, "It is I!" Third, he said, "Don't be afraid!" If I could use a very cheesy analogy here. The words "take courage" and "don't be afraid"...they are the bread of the sandwich. The meat of what Jesus said is, "It is I!" Jesus told them to be courageous and unafraid. Why? Because, "It is I!" I love those words. "It is I!"

Peter responded in faith. Yes he did. The text records Peter as saying, "Lord, if it is you...."

Peter literally said, "Lord, since it is you...." Peter recognized Jesus...realized this was no ghost. He almost challenged Jesus. He wanted to walk on water, too. Jesus invited Peter to step out of the boat. Peter did. Peter walked on water. Peter began to sink.

Okay, I am not going to pursue what has become the most taught teaching of this story. You know...if you want to walk on water, you have to get out of the boat. If you want to walk on water, you have to keep your eyes on Jesus. See, Peter took his eyes off Jesus. He began to focus on the wind. The text does not say he looked at the waves. He looked at the wind. That's when he began to sink. I get all that. Maybe there is something else here.

I mean Peter had enough faith to get out of that boat. I think everyone here has enough faith to get out of the boat. Jesus says, "Follow me!" We follow. Jesus invites us to step out in faith, and we step out. I am one who believes that the first step is not the most difficult one.

But that same faith that enables us to get out of the boat ought to sustain us when the storm comes. Not more faith...the same faith. Peter's faith was strong enough to get him out of the boat. It should have already been strong enough to sustain him in the storm. So it would seem the steps that follow the first step would be the more challenging ones.

And here is what I find interesting. Peter began to sink. Jesus reached out his hand and rescued him. He said to Peter, "You of little faith." Not the only time Jesus uttered those words. Then he followed up with a question. "Why did you doubt?" They were still standing there on the water. They were not back in the boat. Peter was standing there on the water...with Jesus...hearing Jesus ask him, "Why did you doubt?" Perhaps Jesus was still holding his hand...in the midst of the howling wind of fear, Jesus asked, "Why did you doubt?"

Think about it. Really think about this. How do you think Peter felt at that moment? "It is I...why did you doubt?" How would you answer such a question? Really. You are in the midst of a

storm. The wind is howling. You panic. You feel you might soon be over your head. You feel yourself beginning to sink. Peter never sank...he only began to sink. You begin to sink. And Jesus reaches out his hand and catches you. The storm is still raging, but you and Jesus are standing there. Jesus looks you in the eye. It is a penetrating but oh so compassionate look. And Jesus asks you, "Why did you doubt?" What is your answer? I'll share with you my answer. My answer would be the same answer Peter gave. It appears Peter offered no response. There is no answer to that question because there is no good reason to doubt. "Well, you see, Jesus, I doubted because...." No.

For followers of Jesus...for those who have answered the invitation to come and have taken that first step...there is no good answer to that question. Doubts have a tendency to disappear in the face of a question about their cause.

So difficult—and simple—as it seems, I'm thinking we just need to relax. Storms come...we feel like we are in over our heads...relax. Trouble seems heavy. You know what Jesus asked the disciples a time or two when they exhibited a lack of faith? This is the Dan Doughty paraphrase. Jesus asked, "Are you so dense that you don't get it?" In fact, in next week's Scripture passage, Jesus will ask his disciples, "Are you still so dull?" Fact check me.

Jesus is always there and always reminds us, "It is I!" Hear that. "It is I!" Be courageous. Don't fear. We rise and stand above it with Jesus.

But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!"