

August 10, 2014 - Matthew 14: 22-33  
Irving Park Lutheran Church, Pastor Erin Bouman

### **Floating in the Storm**

In the Biblical imagination, raging waters represent chaos, opposition, churning and challenging forces. In the creation story of Genesis 1 God brings order to a dark and formless void by separating the waters. In time, human wickedness multiplies, and then comes the flood. Wild waters continue with Jonah, who cannot hide from God in a boat and is tossed overboard. In psalms of lament, waves overwhelm and waters close in above and on every side. And today in the gospel, the disciples get in a boat, on the Sea of Galilee, and there is a storm, and a sighting, and a hand.

The Sea of Galilee is a relatively shallow lake, at its maximum depth only about 140 feet—that's just a bit shallower than Lake Erie, the shallowest of our Great Lakes at 190 feet at maximum depth. Storms can whip up suddenly on shallower lakes, so my mother's brothers used to say. My mom grew up in Cleveland, and her brothers liked to fish on Lake Erie.

You don't need to be a fisherman, though, to know about storms. Storms of life are part of our imagination. Storms of life are part of our reality. And they are frightening. Perhaps the storms in your life have to do with illness. Maybe you, or someone you love is sick, has been sick for some time. You don't know how or if they're going to get better, how or if you are going to manage. Maybe you are not managing; grief threatens to pull you under. Perhaps the storms in your life have to do with your job. Maybe your work is high stress, non-stop, never enough time, never able to get ahead. You are battered by expectations, you see the waves coming, and how they just keep getting bigger. Perhaps your storm is financial. You are barely making it, hanging onto to an undersized buoy; a sudden, large expense could capsize you. Or perhaps your storm is personal, a relationship that leaves you feeling seasick.

The storms of life swirl around us. The wind howls, the waves crash, our hearts race, we are afraid. The disciples felt that way, too, their hearts were full of fear, on a boat, in the middle of a storm. Then they saw something, someone—which made them even more afraid! Even scarier than the storm was the appearance of God. The story explains that they thought it was a ghost. Surely that's frightening, a ghost, lots of thrilling movies make lots of money on that. But I don't think mistaking Jesus for a ghost totally explains away the disciples' fear. The appearance of God is itself frightening. Think of Moses' encounter at the burning bush, where God reveals himself, saying, I AM. That's actually exactly what Jesus says in the text, not "it is I," but literally "I AM." Even more than a storm, the appearance of God—what is known as a theophany, an encounter with the Divine, those times in which we are made aware of a vastness, and a power, that is bigger and beyond us—even more than a storm, often in the middle of that very storm, the appearance of God makes us aware of our size, aware of our insignificance and our transience. Encounter with God is awe-inducing.

In Jesus, encounter with God is that. Here and at other times in the gospel, Jesus does things, says things, that leave people speechless, astounded, even afraid. But even more than that, in the gospel, in Jesus, encounter with God is comforting, encouraging. "Take heart," Jesus says to the disciples, "do not be afraid." In Jesus, encounter with God is accessible, familiar. As quoted in Romans, which quotes Deuteronomy, "the Word is near you, on your lips, and in your heart." In Jesus, disciples, humans, you and I can have a relationship with the IAM. In Jesus,

God speaks words of encouragement and identification, words which prompt the disciple Peter to step right out of the boat.

I remember, as a little girl, hearing this next step in the story, this step outside of the boat and into the churning waters, and thinking here a thrilling story gets even more exciting. It sounded to me like an act of courage. There's a boldness to Peter's step which is completely in keeping with his character.

Yet there's also something troubling about what Peter does, or what he says to Jesus, "If it is you, command me to come." There's a "Prove it!" element to what Peter says, that has the sound of an ultimatum with the Almighty. Biblical commentators point out that Peter's statement, "Lord, if it is you..." resembles the Devil's temptations in the wilderness, when the Devil said to Jesus, "If you are the Son of God..." Then there's the fact that Peter's step takes him outside of the boat—the boat, which is the ancient symbol for the church.

So perhaps Peter's step is less brave, than brash. Perhaps it's bravado. Perhaps his step is less courage, than an attempt to cover up a deep, deep fear. As the story continues we see that fear is still there for Peter, when the wind continues, and he starts to sink; starts thrashing about, and cries out for help.

Brash moves and bravado are not always courage; they are sometimes cries for help. Sometimes the most energetic, the most bold and out-there person is a person who is truly, deeply, struggling. I think of the poem entitled, "Not Waving But Drowning." In the imagined world of this poem, a crowd gathers around a corpse pulled out of the water. It's a morbid scene, but there's an air of nonchalance. The onlookers remark, "Poor chap, he always loved larking...it must have been too cold for him, his heart gave way." Then the dead man speaks, but the onlookers cannot hear him, cannot hear the dead man moaning, "Oh no, no, no...it was too cold always, I was much too far out all my life, and not waving, but drowning."

My mother said that poem reminded her of one her brothers, one of her fishing-loving brothers: loud and boisterous, the life of the party. But behind all the noise and action, a deep sadness.

To him, to Peter, to us, in the middle of the storm, when we are sinking, Jesus reaches out his hand. Jesus takes us by the hand, and helps us into the boat. The winds cease, and we worship, we little ship that is the church, sailing on the wide expanse of the world.

We can't stay in the boat, not all the time. Nor does Jesus want us to. Impertinent as Peter may be, Jesus tells him, "Come." Come out into the water. We, like Peter, will need to step out. We live in a world that includes storms. But like Peter, we have a hand in this. We have Jesus' encouragement, Jesus' comfort, Jesus' presence, Jesus' hand helping us as navigate life's waters.

Jesus' hand, like the hand that helped you learn the back float. Jesus' hand is like the hand that holds up your back, as you let your body relax, no thrashing about. Gently, gradually, the hand moves away, as you realize your body can float on the surface of the water.

The I AM who created you, is with you. His hand is ever near you, take heart.