

Matthew 8: 19-27

²³ And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. ²⁴ A windstorm arose on the sea, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. ²⁵ And they went and woke him up, saying, “Lord, save us! We are perishing!” ²⁶ And he said to them, “Why are you afraid, you of little faith?” Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm. ²⁷ They were amazed, saying, “What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?”

Trinity Presbyterian Church
February 12, 2017

“Navigating the Waters of Discipleship: Following Jesus into the Storm”

My father loves fishing in Canada. Every year he would pack up his fishing gear and head up north into Ontario. One year he invited me along. So there we were on a secluded Canadian lake, on our tiny little fishing boat about a half mile from the shore when out of nowhere the sky went dark. The wind began to howl. The waves became frantic, rocking our boat side to side. As we panicked, I reeled in the lines as quickly as I could as lightning bolts lit up the sky around us. I don't think I've ever been so afraid in my life. I also don't think I've ever heard my father swear that much and it was in that moment I understood where the phrase “swearing like a sailor” came from. So we started our little motor and putted toward the shore afraid in the storm. And as the waves knocked us around, the rain pelting down, I remember saying what the disciples said: “Lord, Save us.”

We have all navigated storms in our life before—or at least watched someone who has—and we have all said those words: “Lord, Save us.” They are the words we speak during moments when the sky grows dark, the wind begins to howl and the waves of adversity come crashing down on top of the little boat we call life. When the phone rings at midnight and the news is bad—really bad: a loved one has died. There is a lump in our throat as we form the words: “Lord, Save us.” Or we experience a chain of serious events happening, one after the other—as if a dark cloud is following us around. When it rains it pours. We find ourselves crying out, “Lord, Save us!” Or perhaps we sense something in our gut: like a sailor out at sea watching something brewing on horizon—putting a finger in the air just waiting to see if the wind has changed directions. And as we watch the dark clouds coming closer we say, “Lord, save us!” We've all said the words. We've all been in the storm.

And like the disciples, when the storm hits we grow frantic. Pulling down the sails. Trying to steer our ship out of the chaos. We might buckle down, doubling our resolve. We grab an oar and row harder—or make some changes in our life, but we can't make the storm go away. And as our instinct takes over and the jolts of adrenaline course through our veins we discover there is an unwelcomed passenger who has found his way aboard our ship: his name is fear. Stormy times—uncertain times—bring about fear.

Trusting in the wisdom of the room, I'll ask you: **what happens to us when we allow fear on board?** Your answer could be both positive and negative.

Fear brings paralysis. Fear brings division—separating humanity into piles of “us” and “them.” Fear does not care about facts. Fear does not care about statistics. Fear is not rational and will never listen to reason. Fear, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, “Gnaws...at all the ties that bind a person to God and to others...while hell rejoices.” Although we know in our minds that the refugees are our neighbors that Jesus tells us to love, our fear reminds us of terrorism's possibilities and so we listen to the unwelcomed

passenger who says, “Barricade them out and let them deal with their own problems.” All the while gnawing at the tie that binds us as hell is rejoicing.

But look what Jesus does. Jesus rises up, calms the storm and then asks a curious question: why are you afraid? Well, isn’t it obvious? we might respond. Does Jesus not see what is happening? Does he not see that we are trying to navigate our ways through storms of racism, sexism, xenophobia? Does Jesus not see what is happening across the world as countries board themselves up as if preparing for a great storm? Does he not see we are a divided people? Or all the fear swirling around in the immigrant’s eyes?

Or perhaps we get personal: Jesus have you not seen my life? The anxiety that wakes me up at 2 a.m. The anxiety that keeps us from looking at the front page news. Or the medication I have to take just to make it through a normal day. You know all this, Jesus and the best you can come up with is, “Why are you afraid?”

But here’s the thing: the disciples never answer his question. Instead they ask a question of their own: who is this? Who is this that calms the storm? Notice: their fear turns into awe. They are awe-struck by the savior who rises in the midst of fear. To be in awe is actually commanded in our bibles—to fear the Lord. But it isn’t judgement that requires awe, it is God’s love. 1 John tells us, “Perfect love,” does what? Casts out our fear.

It was the awe of God that compelled the early church to rise up unafraid to the Emperor. When citizen’s allegiance was to be declared to Caesar as Lord, disciples recited the Apostle’s Creed: “I believe in God the Father Almighty...and in Jesus Christ, his only son, *our LORD*.” It was how the church during World War II found the courage to write Jews fake baptismal certificates to protect their Jewish identity; or hiding the vulnerable in their basements—even in their personal homes—putting themselves at risk for a stranger they hardly knew. It is the love of God rising among us today in churches such as in Missoula, Montana who, despite receiving death threats are opening their doors to refugees. “It’s just fear,” they say. “Who is this?” Who is this who rises in the storm? Who is this who grounds the church in love? Who is this who turns fear into awe?

There is an old African proverb that says, “When the roots have grown deep, you need not fear the storm.” We are people whose roots are grounded deep in awe and love. So as the sky grows dark, the wind howls and as waves come crashing down, there is a savior on our tiny boat rising up. And just think: if he can still a storm, just imagine the fear he can calm in us.