

Texts: Matthew 14:22-33, Genesis 37:1-4,12-28

As we read the stories in the Bible, we enter from a privileged vantage point. We get to digest the entire story, take in the full plot development at one sitting. We receive it all: the beginning, middle, and end. We see where the dramatic tension intensified, and how it was resolved. We know the simmering family conflicts and how God wove grace, hope, and salvation into what otherwise would turn out to be just another tragic story. We have the whole drama before us, start to end: sorrow turns into joy, loss turns into gain, darkness becomes light, death is transformed into never-ending life.

However, in our own stories, we have only gotten this far. We only know the story to this point. It is not complete; the drama is not over. The plot is doled out piecemeal, in small steps. We may be at sorrow today, real and unrelenting. We may be at loss, painful and overwhelming. Things may look dark, even on a Sunday morning, in church.

In our Genesis reading, the drama is just beginning to unfold, about a particular family with twelve sons. The father has selected a clear favorite – Joseph the snitch who underhandedly plays the father against his brothers -making his brothers are so angry that some are ready to kill him. Others look for a less violent way to eliminate him. They sell him to foreigners who take him to Egypt. The story stops there today.

Our Sunday news sources can only take us so far in the stories today, then stop. We pray for peace between nations and we commit ourselves and our church to resist racism and bigotry in all its detestable forms. Like with Joseph, and his brothers, and the hidden weaving of God's grace and mercy, and that point in the story it is unknown how things will develop, but things are unraveling, dangers are very real. Faith is being tested, where the story lies today.

I thought if we stop, after each verse in our reading in Matthew, as though we don't know the whole story, or what comes next, like we are with our current places in our own stories, we might open our imaginations to new possibilities.

Jesus **made** the disciples get into the boat and row to the other side while he dismissed the crowds after feeding the five thousand men plus women and children. Writers compare the disciples getting into the boat with followers climbing onboard the church. Jesus calls us into the church (boat) and sends the church into far off places, across the tumult of life's wild, restless sea. In the sending, there is separating from Jesus. Danger and risk lurk for Jesus's followers, on the way to the other side. Maybe we are there, on the sea of uncertainty, vulnerable to countless threats, no sign of Jesus. It's hard.

Evening came, Jesus climbed a mountain to pray. Maybe Jesus is connected to his followers, spiritually, as he prays. Who knows? Again, it's imperceptible. Maybe we're there. Hoping, in some way, we are close, by prayer, with Jesus, but we have no tangible proof at the moment.

Meanwhile, the boat (church), fights against headwinds. Opposing forces, visible and invisible, battle against the church's fledgling efforts. Smaller numbers, tight budgets,

aging members, illness, the summer slump, an increasingly secular, non-religious culture, God knows the church faces strong headwinds. Battered by wave after wave, one thing after another, far from land, far from safety, far from certainty. Imagine that is where we are today. Not knowing what comes next. Accepting the reality that we may be out on this difficult sea for some time. Headwinds and pounding waves forcing the church to go where it never planned to go.

Early in the morning, he came to the disciples, walking on the restless sea, upon the wild chaos of where they were. His course uncompromised by any wind or wave. It sounds impossible, walking on water. It sounds impossible, these visible and invisible forces not changing his course, slowing his pace, or causing him concern. Heading for the boat, drawn toward the church. Are we there, today?

Surprisingly, when the disciples saw him, they were terrified; they thought he was a ghost, that he wasn't for real. They were so overwhelmed by fear that they screamed. We scream out in fear, when the arrival of the real saving Jesus seems so unlikely, almost impossible. How could Jesus get to us now, in this place? We face the terror of diminishing hope, with no clear path to peace, the unlikeliness of God's love delivering us from these present storms. It's a ghost, an image from the past, not capable of restoring wonder, joy, or kindness. But, the story does not stop here. Your story, the church's story does not stop there, does not stop at fear; we state our belief that Jesus is not a hollow ghost from the past.

He speaks: "Be encouraged! It's me. Don't be afraid." You all are alive and well because it's the real me. Fear is one option but it is not our only choice. "Be encouraged! It's me. Don't be afraid." The story rolls on. Every time we hear the reassuring voice of Jesus, when we receive encouragement, as our fears dissipate. And something else comes up – often out of our own mouths.

Peter says – "Lord, if it's you, order me to come to you on the water." If it's you, indicates a little shakiness in accepting Jesus's arrival. There is some ambiguity in the morning haze, as the storm still rages. "If" sounds like a desire to test that real presence. Order me, Peter says, empower me to come to you, above the fray, untouched by the chaos, against the headwinds, uncompromised by the waves. We want real proof that Jesus is with us. We want to advance, move forward, to get closer to Jesus, progress toward the impossible – toward peace, toward racial equality.

Jesus says, in reply to the desire to take the risk, to move forward, to step out of the boat: "Come". Foreshadowing, perhaps, the invitation to come, to disembark from this boat, from this mortal body, to where death is no more, neither trouble or sorrow or pain. Jesus says, "Come". Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water toward Jesus. One small step for a man, one open path for all believers. It can be done, the invitation is ours. Peter, upon whom the church is built, leads the way.

The wind pummels him, fear rises, and Peter sinks. He knows who is near, Jesus, what Jesus can do – "Lord, rescue me!", he shouts. Jesus instinctively extends his hand,

saving Peter from the threats and chaos. “You man of weak faith! Why did you begin to have doubts?” The chaos, swirling around us and within us, the internal headwinds of doubt and fear fighting against the course of faith, still blow. In the story, in Matthew, when Peter and Jesus got in the boat, the wind settled down. As we step onboard this community of believers, this boat fueled by love and faith, steering toward peace and insuring the equal value of all persons, with us and Jesus onboard, the winds settle down. Doubts and fears. Threats and dangers. We think clearly, see the way ahead. Things quiet down so we can hear, trust, and be with the one who saves us again.

Commentator Andrew Foster Connors, writing about this passage says, “Whatever the storm, whatever the uncertainties, whatever the fears, the church that is willing to risk a closer step toward Jesus has nothing to fear. With him there is courage to engage in every change, every uncertainty, every fear. Without him, we do not have much to offer the world. With him, there is little else that we need.” (*Feasting on the Gospels*, Matthew, Volume 2, p. 18) The story reaches its end with everyone onboard worshipping Jesus, saying, “You must be God’s Son!” Every knee should bow and every tongue proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God. Amen.