

I Am with You Always 2020
Isaiah 43:1-7 Matthew 14:22-33

Isaiah 43:1-7 (New Revised Standard Version)

But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; I will say to the north, "Give them up," and to the south, "Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth— everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

Matthew 14:22-33 (New Revised Standard Version)

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

A little boy, playing while his mother was busy preparing dinner,
was asked to get her a box of noodles from the pantry closet.

But when he opened the door, and peered into the dark pantry
he protested, "Its dark and scary in there, I'm afraid."

Then his mother insisted, "Remember what you learned in Sunday School,
that Jesus is always be with you even in there. Go ahead, you'll be all right."

Still peering anxiously into the darkened pantry, she heard him say,
"Jesus, **if** you are in there, would you mind handing out that box of noodles?" ...

... something like when Peter said in vs. 28

"Lord, **if** it is you, command me to come to you on the water."

The passage we read from Matthew 14 was intended
to do more than just describe an event from the life of Jesus.

The way it is told, the particular words that the author uses
and even the dialogue between the characters in the story

are meant to connect and encourage Matthew's readers
with a hopeful promise of God's presence and power...
... especially when feeling fearful or anxious or facing adversity.

Specifically, the disciples had been sent by Jesus to cross the sea,
where they encountered life-threatening winds and waves,
and then **the presence of Jesus amid the raging storm.**

The author of Matthew is intending to connect that story
to the intense struggle, torture and suffering of persecution
that the faith-community of Matthew was having to endure.

In 70AD, the Roman army destroyed Jerusalem, including the Temple,
and drove out the Jewish people, including the Christians,
forcing them to relocate to other areas of the Empire.

Under Nero, Rome was trying to wipe out the Christian Church
through systematic persecution, oppression and torture.

The Christians of Matthew's community of faith
were struggling and hurting, loved ones had been killed
even though they were faithful and trying to obey Jesus Christ.

Parallel to the disciples being commanded to cross the sea by Jesus,
those early Christians were facing overwhelming danger
of a difficult, fearful and treacherous journey of faith
against overwhelming oppression, torture & persecution.

Like the disciples at sea, Jesus wasn't with them physically,
so too those Christians felt frightened, anxious and alone,
while they were expectantly waiting for Jesus to return.

Matthew was making a clear connection between that early Church
and the disciples trying to cross the treacherous and turbulent sea. vs. 22, 24
... he(Jesus) made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, ... but by this time
the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them.

The disciples are struggling while trying to obey as Jesus commanded,
even without the physical presence of Jesus with them,
just like the Church, when Matthew was written.

The Greek words the author of Matthew uses are very specific,
literally **'the boat was being tortured by the waves'**
and **'the wind was in hostile opposition to them'**

Like the disciples struggling in the boat crossing a rough sea,
so too, those Christians were obeying as Jesus had commanded...

... which left them wondering, **why and where is Jesus in all of this?**,
just as some of us have asked that over these past few months.

That image of a small boat, far from land, in a storm-raging sea,
against severe crashing waves and hostile opposing winds,
seems like an apt description of social media postings,
and of following politics and current events these days,
not to mention the anxiety & sense of loss we feel due to Covid-19.

Sometimes in the calm,
we forget God's presence and power over the storm.
And then during the chaos of the storm,
we fear supposing that God might ignore, fail or abandon...
... which is to stifle our hope, peace and joy,
and weaken our trust and confidence in God.
No, these are not easy or comfortable times in which to live.

But Matthew's message is about hope, assurance and encouragement,
that just as Jesus was **near the disciples in their boat**
and walking toward them across the raging wind and sea ----

-so too Jesus' words came in hopeful answer to fear and concern: vs. 27
and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

...Jesus spoke to them

"Take heart"

meaning: **be confident because of God's faithfulness & promises.**

That defines the true source of hope, power and confidence, our God.
We trust because of God's power and steadfast love are with us---

--- **which was clearly the promise, hope and message**
that Matthew's Christian community most needed to hear,
and these days especially, so do we!

Several commentators condemn Peter in this next scene,
claiming that he was impetuous and presumptuous in asking,
vs. 28 ... "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."

They insist that he should have stayed in the boat with the others,
just as we should remain secure in the comfort of church
as our safe place to stand against and apart from
the raging storms, chaos and tumult of our world...
... but there is another way **a better way** to read this story.

As Presbyterians, we have understood that our task as Christians
is to make a difference as salt and light sent out into the world,

by living faithfully and boldly proclaiming **the Good News of God's gracious love through Jesus Christ for all people...**
 ... because if God created someone, (which does include everyone),
 then God loves them, and wants healing, hope and justice for them.

In vs. 28, Peter says, 'Lord, **if** it is you'.

But following Greek grammar and language more carefully,
 it is more accurately translated, 'Lord, **since** it is you'...
 ... a seemingly subtle difference, yet quite significant.

So the verse would read,

"Lord, **since** it is you command me to come to you upon the water"
 or "can I come out there? can I come and walk with you?"

**Peter wants more than
 just the complacent safety of waiting and watching from the boat.**

**What a bold and courageous act and example of God-trusting faith,
 to step out from the boat at sea from land
 and into the turbulent stormy waves and gusting wind...
 ... and shouldn't we all aspire to such bold faithfulness and trust?**

In the next scene, when Peter fails and flails in his wet-attempt,
 and I find that to be realistically familiar and encouraging
 for no, everything I try does not always work out well.

When asked, Jesus gave Peter the command, "come".

Come on, you can do this, and **I will be with you to save you,**
 for obviously Jesus didn't say, 'come',
 so that he could watch Peter sink like a rock –
- that's not the sort of God we serve.

Several commentators place a harsh spin on Peter's failure
 claiming that had he kept his eyes on Jesus instead of the storm,
**and that if he'd tried just a little bit harder,
 he wouldn't have lost his footing and failed.**

And then they go on and make a personal warning and application,
 that we fail because we don't focus on Jesus **hard enough,**
 but are too easily distracted by the things of this world...
 ... and maybe that's true, **but where is the grace and hope in that?**

How does that help me when I struggle, when I am afraid or hurting?
 How does that strengthen or encourage me when I fail and fall?
 Isn't that approach a bit like taking an easy and cheap shot
 at someone who is already wounded, feeling guilty and broken?

It reminds me of hitting an infield grounder in Little League,
running as fast as possible to beat the throw to 1st base,
and hearing the coach holler, "run, try to run little faster"...
and thinking, "Gee coach, why didn't I think of that..."
... yes, such incredibly wise, helpful and insightful advice.

Haven't you ever given it your very best, and yet still failed?,
and despite your all-out efforts, you still crashed and burned?

**That's when I really need Jesus Christ, grace amid my failure & loss,
even more than when I am successful, and all is good & going well.**

**This story in Matthew 14 is about God and God's grace,
and not about what we can or should do for ourselves.**

We read in the next scene, vs. 30

But when he (Peter) noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!"

Peter's cry echoes the hopeful promise of Isaiah 43:1-2, 3

But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, he who formed you. Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, **you are mine**. When you pass through the waters, **I will be with you**; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, **your Savior**.

That's the God I need to know, one who will always be there for me.

The grace and the intended message of this passage is not that Peter should have stayed in the boat or had more faith and tried harder,
**but that at least he ventured out from the boat
and that even when he failed and started to sink,
at least he knew where to turn, and who to ask.**

**I need such courage, to get out from the familiar comfort of "boat",
and accept God's call to venture forth in faith and faithfulness-
- knowing that if I do fail, Jesus will be there to save & sustain me...**

... just as Jesus said concluding Matthew's gospel, Matthew 28:19-20

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, **I am with you always**, to the end of the age."

**** Isn't that exactly what this story in chapter 14 is describing?
Go and serve me boldly, even when it's strange and difficult,
and even if you fail, I will still be there with you always.**

When Jesus saved Peter, he said, you of little faith, why did you doubt?
and here, the word 'doubt' literally means, to be of two minds,
which is to vacillate, it doesn't mean to question or deny.

Peter was caught between the frightful raging storm all around him
and his trust and faithfulness and love for Jesus Christ---

- and though he was a man of only 'a little faith'
as least it was enough to step out of the boat and try...

... and surely Peter's failure and fall is far bolder and more faithful
than all the other disciples who never ventured from the boat.

Peter, inexplicably wants to walk with Jesus on the water, and
I think he's motivated by a heart-longing for union with Christ.

He did walk on the water a bit, but then fear undermined his trust.
But his failure also opened to a deepening of a faith more secure,
more tested & strengthened than success would have of produced,
a real and practical experience of the loving and saving Presence
of the Holy One who lifted him up from his terror and failure...

... and isn't that why Jesus is the Good News?

This story is about the true nature of God and our faithful response,
about God calling us from a comfortable complacency **in the boat**.

In, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer points out,

"Peter had to leave the boat and risk his life on the sea, in order to learn both his own weakness and the almighty power of his Lord. If Peter had not taken the risk, he would never have learned the meaning of faith ... **for only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes.**"

** I believe that in this text

Jesus is calling us to step out from the boat into the waves,
to risk our life and comfort, to throw caution to the wind...
...and to follow and venture beyond mere comfort, ease and security,
into the perilous seas of **dangerous discipleship**,
so to proclaim the Gospel out into the world around us.

Our call not just sit and watch the world happen all around us,
trying not to make waves while we're waiting out life's storms.

As Paul writes, Philippians 4:9, 13

Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. ... for I can do all things through him who strengthens me.