

A Sermon for DaySpring
by Eric Howell
Lord, Save Me
Matthew 14:22-33
August 13, 2023

In our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus is on retreat, on a mountain praying in solitude, which is where he wanted to be since before the crowds interrupted him the first time hungry for his teaching and a miraculous dinner. Now that the day is over, Jesus is finally away up on a mountain in solitude. Meanwhile, the disciples are in a boat in the middle of the lake, facing winds they cannot overcome. They are in crisis, a crisis amplified as all communal and personal crises are, by exhaustion, frustration, and fear.

After a long night of this, Jesus comes to them, walking toward them on the sea. "It's a ghost!" they cried out.

There are two stories in Matthew's gospel of the disciples in trouble on the sea. It's helpful to keep them straight because the one significant difference between them means everything to the experience of being in trouble. In the first story in chapter 8, they are on the same sea when a storm comes up on them, and they're afraid. But that time, the first time, Jesus was with them. He was asleep below deck, but at least he was with them. So when they had exhausted all their own ability to fight, he was right there to help. And he did, "Peace be still," he commanded the wind and waves, and the wind and waves obeyed. It's one thing to face a crisis believing and knowing that Jesus is with you.

I've seen people face enormous challenges with this faith. This is hard, but they can say, "I'm not alone. This is painful, but God is with me." Often God's presence with us is made manifest through the compassionate presence of other people. We have old family friends from years ago whose son was battling a rare and devastating childhood cancer that ultimately claimed his life just two weeks ago. Even in the searing suffering of their loss, the family drew strength from their siblings, aunts, uncles, relatives who had come to see him. And, they said, that doesn't even account for the revolving door of friends coming by. They finally put up a sign saying the door was open and to come on in! And so many people did. There is nothing in the world that blunts the profound grief of his sickness and death. But, and this is just as true: they knew, they felt, the sustaining presence of God with them in so very many ways.

Sometimes this is the reality we experience. In crisis, in suffering, in trouble, we learn we are not alone. When you feel like God is somewhere near, even in the trouble, you can withstand profound suffering, and in your faith and prayer shake the gates of hell.

When you feel like God isn't anywhere nearby, faith can crumble, and fear takes over. Consider Elijah: he'd faithfully and courageously served God at the peril of his own life at a time when Ahab and Jezebel ruled Israel. Ahab was mostly pretty feckless; Jezebel was ruthless. And Jezebel was after Elijah, threatening his life. Elijah, who had been so courageous, finally was

undone. He fled. He ran far. As far as he could run and then ran farther. He ran until he thought he would just lay down and die and then he got up and went further, until he found a cave at Mt. Horeb and hid there. He'd gone just about to the end of the world as far as he knew. But there he learned he still wasn't away from God, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He replied, "I've done everything I could to serve you the way I thought you wanted, but it's not working. And now there's no one left. I am all alone."

Can you hear it? Can you hear the desperation of feeling all alone? We can face enormous challenges when we believe we are not alone. Our spirits crumble pretty quickly when we believe we are all alone.

A verse in 2 Chronicles (16.9) promises, "The eyes of the Lord sweep two and fro the entire earth to strengthen those whose hearts belong to him." That's reassurance when we feel alone. God knows we can be there. At a party, you can feel totally alone; in the lunchroom at school, you can feel totally alone; on a weekend when you have nothing to do and feel useless, you can feel alone; when you feel like you're the only one amongst all those you work with who has any sort of moral compass, you can feel totally alone . . . You have your own stories. You've been there.

What I don't want—what I never want—is to feel abandoned by God. I can go a long way on my own strength; I can go a long way on my own energy, grit, and determination. But what I never want to feel is feeling abandoned by God. I never want to feel like I'm outside of God's presence or God's grace. Last week's texts prompted us to consider our need for solitude as more than loneliness. This week's texts prompt us to consider our need for connection with God. A crowd can be fine, a group can be nice enough. What we really need, as revealed in crisis, is a community through which we experience the grace and presence of God. A community without that is just a crowd. A community with that, on its best days, is, well . . . church.

Neither the disciples nor Elijah had what they felt like was anything like that. They felt alone; they felt abandoned. Disciples in a boat battered by the wind and waves, alone. A prophet hiding in a cave in the wilderness, threatened to lose everything, exhausted and hopeless about everything he'd devoted his life to, alone. They'd all been brave in the past; they'd all stood up to the powers and their opponents and done what was theirs to do, but everyone has their breaking point.

And what about you? Have you ever come close to yours, to your breaking point?

When you were there and felt all alone, would you have recognized God if God had shown up? Would you have known it was God? One thing about these two stories is that you can feel them. You can feel the disciples' fear and exhaustion in their plight just as real as you can feel the oars under your cramping shoulders, and the wind and waves splashing in your face. You can feel the prophet's anguish and hopelessness at the world just as you can feel the desire for destructive rage to be unleashed on those you hate like a mighty wind or fire or earthquake to tear them down.

So in the state he was in, how did Elijah know that the violence of the blowing wind wasn't God? The word for wind was the same for spirit—a spirit which at creation hovered over the waters. How did he know? How did Elijah know God was not in the earthquake? God is the ground of our being, he whose voice shakes the cedars of Lebanon. How did he know? How did Elijah know God was not in the fire? We have images of the destructive power of fire in our minds' eyes today. And God was revealed to Moses in the non-destructive fire of the burning bush and led Israel through the wilderness by a column of fire. Indeed, it was at that very mountain, where through earthquake and fire, the power of God had been made known to the Israelites. Mt. Horeb is Mt. Sinai.

How did he know? Sometimes one of the hardest things to do is discern the true voice and word of God in the noise of the storms outside us and raging within us. Especially when we already feel all alone. It takes faith to wait to see what lasts. The winds die down; the earth stops shaking; the fires extinguish. And what's left is where God is: in the voice, thin and calm, the voice that speaks to Elijah, "You are not alone, and you're not done with all that I have for you." And that's how you know. You know it's God when you receive a future and a hope when you believed you had no future and no hope. God was not in Elijah's rage or fear. God was in the space between and in the path back home.

The disciples also feel alone the 2nd time they are in a storm at sea, facing their crisis, feeling like Jesus is nowhere near at all, like God is nowhere to be found. That's the situation they find themselves in this time. They are in trouble down in the middle of the storm. And Jesus could not be farther away, up on a mountaintop doing whatever it is the messiah does up there. Whatever laudable, spiritually enlightened communion with God is happening up on the mountain where Jesus is, you know where he's not at the moment? Down in the middle of the storm, in the little boat on the big sea. Until he is.

He comes walking to them on the sea right into the storm, and greets them by saying, have courage, it is I. Literally, I Am, the name of God. I Am is here with you. Do not be afraid.

I confess to you, I don't know what to make of Peter here. On one hand, he has the courage to get out of the boat onto the waves to go to Jesus, and that seems like a sermon that just preaches itself about getting out of the boat in faith and keeping your eyes on Jesus.

On the other hand, Peter's faith is still conditional: "If," he says. In the face of all the evidence that God has come to him to help him in the moment of crisis, he still needs something more to know it's not a ghost, "If you are the Son of God". If. Not, Oh Jesus is here to help. But "If" If you are the son of God, command me to get out of the boat. Which is a really audacious thing to do, in word and deed, especially if your name is Peter, which means Rock. And you don't walk on water because you're a human being, and that's not what we do.

I have to hear Jesus hearing Peter offer him this audacious chance to prove himself... saying "uh, ok, come on." But he does. And he drops like a rock. It reads like he actually takes a few

steps as long as he keeps his eye on Jesus, until the wind and waves terrify him. Which is amazing. But then he drops . . . like a rock.

After all of this, he's sinking, and now he's really all alone in real danger. He cries out, in faith or at least in desperation, the one thing we can say when we believe God is somewhere with us, anywhere near us: "Lord, save me!"

It's more than a momentary cry to be plucked from the waters. It's more than "rescue me;" it's the desperate appeal for the power of the one who has the power of God, over the wind, earth, and fire, the one who has the power over the storm and storms of life, and comes to us right into it. He comes to us, right in the middle of the storm. You are not alone.

Jesus says to the breathless, sopping Peter, once the worst of the danger is over. "Why did you doubt?" We never hear Peter's answer, if he manages to offer one. I think his doubt wasn't that he couldn't walk on water; he can't. He was never supposed to. He's not God.

But he doubted that Jesus would come to them in the crisis, in the raging storm, in the time of trouble. And this is the whole point of the gospel. From the first line of the gospel that calls Jesus: Christ—the Messiah—God with us, to the last line of the gospel: I am with you always. From first to last, from beginning to end, you are not alone. Whatever you are facing or will face; whatever is going on around you, against you, or churning inside of you. Whatever it is, you are held in the fierce, terrible, wonderful, nail-scarred hands of Jesus, even when the only words that can escape your lips that sound anything like faith are "Lord, save me." In those words is future and hope. If you confess with your lips and believe in your heart, you will be saved.

This is the great promise, the great gift of the gospel. On those days, when there is no other word of profession of our faith that we can make, those words are all we need. Lord, save me.

May those words be on our heart and on our lips as we come to receive these signs of the assurance of God's grace, presence, and salvation with us.

Amen.

