

"When Jesus Comes"

Matthew 8: 23-27; 14:22-27

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Our two texts this morning concern two incidents in our Lord's ministry that are DIFFERENT and yet very much the SAME for they involve a SIMILAR boat during a SIMILAR storm on the very SAME sea. The first account opens: "And when he (Jesus) got into the boat, his disciples followed him." Like a mother hen leading her brood of chicks, Jesus gets into the bow of their boat first and they obediently follow right behind him. We are then told that as the skiff got under way, the sea grew SO turbulent that it began to take on water to the extent it was in danger of sinking. Jesus, however, remained oblivious to it all for he remains asleep in the front of the boat. In their distress, the disciples hurriedly woke him, saying, "Save us, Lord: we are perishing" but Jesus responds, "Why are you afraid, O men of little faith?" He then got up and rebuked the winds and the sea and there was a great calm. He was trying to help them see that so long as he was with them, they had NOTHING TO FEAR, that his mere PRESENCE would be sufficient enough for them. He wanted them to know that regardless of how high the waves or how fierce the winds or how dark the night, his PERSONAL PRESENCE--his UNCONDITIONAL LOVE AND COMMITMENT TO THEM--was ALL they would ever need to overcome ANY situation no matter HOW GREAT the threat.

Now we come to our SECOND scripture lesson. Jesus had just fed five thousand persons on the hillside overlooking Capernaum using a child's lunch. Afterwards, he instructs his disciples to get in the boat and start rowing across the lake. Where in the EARLIER account, Jesus goes into the boat first and his disciples follow him, in this SECOND account, he makes his DISCIPLES go into the boat FIRST and then he will meet up with them later on the other side. In other words, for the first time, Jesus will not be making the trip WITH them and he is trusting them to make it across BY THEMSELVES. Where he is going and when he will join up with them again, he doesn't tell them.

Why this is significant is that Jesus is giving them their first major exam in the school of faith since he has become their leader. Since the first incident on the lake some six chapters earlier where they so feared for their lives that Jesus reproached them for faithlessness, they had watched Jesus cure people of a whole host of ailments, cast out a number of demons, raise a dead girl back to life, and perhaps perform the greatest of ALL his miracles- feeding five thousands from a couple of loaves and fish. These miracles were not only meant to minister to the people's NEEDS but to help build up his disciples' FAITH. Where Jesus had been taking the lead in all these events, now for the first time he is entrusting them to take the lead WITHOUT his own personal presence to guide them- it would be the first major test of their faith, only how would they DO?

Instead of going with them, he withdrew into one of the many hills surrounding the Sea of Galilee to pray. He felt it necessary to be alone with his Heavenly Father so that he might remain focused on his priorities and await his next set of instructions. As his disciples took orders from Jesus--their leader, so now does Jesus take orders from HIS leader, his Heavenly

Father. Meanwhile, we learn that as night descended over the lake, conditions worsened and the twelve were left struggling to make their way across the Sea of Galilee. These were seasoned fishermen and they were well aware of just how unpredictable the weather could become. Still, as the winds blew stronger, the waves grew higher, and the night sky turned blacker, they found themselves no more than half-way across the lake with ANOTHER three miles yet to go. Not only had their progress stalled in the face of those gale-like winds, but with little hope of swimming to land, they were convinced that their boat was about to sink and that they would all perish together. But all was not lost for the entire time Jesus was high up on that hillside, communing privately with his Heavenly Father, he kept a cautious eye on his disciples- observing their progress and monitoring their distress; as they struggled alone across that sea, NEVER were they ever out of his sight.

This past week, the popular Festival of Homiletics Conference concluded in Denver, Colorado. For one week every year, the world's finest preachers representing all the major denominations assemble in one city and every day and each evening, up to 2000 ministers and lay preachers from all over the country have the privilege of being ministered to by them instead of always having to minister to others. Me and my dear friend Dan, the Lutheran pastor who passed away from Covid two years ago and who I've spoken to you about in the past, have attended the festival together many times over years whether it was held in Minneapolis or Denver, Nashville or Washington, D.C. A few years back, we both attended it in downtown Atlanta and following the concluding session on Friday afternoon, Dan and I took some time to explore the city before flying home. The next morning, we climbed Stone Mountain together- the largest exposed piece of granite in the world and upon which a giant bas relief of Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and the President of the Confederacy Jefferson Davis on horseback is carved. It took us almost two hours to make the thousand foot climb and when we finally arrived at its summit, the scenery was absolutely breathtaking. We were able to see the city of Atlanta in one direction, the Blue Ridge Mountains on another, and even the state of Tennessee in the distance on yet another. You can see things at the top of a mountain which you can NEVER see when you're down in the valley. Hence, where those in the boat could not see JESUS, Jesus from his vantage point high over the Sea of Galilee, could ALWAYS see THEM!

Just at the moment when the twelve think they are about to perish, we are told that in the "fourth watch" of the night, Jesus wasted no time in coming to them. The Jews divided the night into four watches, each consisting of three hour intervals. The first watch commenced at six in the late afternoon and continued until nine; the second watch lasted from nine to twelve midnight; the third watch extended from twelve to three; and the fourth watch went from three o'clock to six o'clock in the morning. At each of these watches, different sentinels or watchmen would patrol the walls of the city or the encampment throughout the night to warn against any surprise attack.

In keeping with the old saying, "It's always darkest just before the dawn," the FOURTH watch is significant because it was considered to be the DARKEST part of the night. Thus, it was in the fourth watch--the hour in which their faith was depleted and all hope was gone, when they were most convinced they were alone and going to perish--that Jesus came to his disciples. And so on that night, his disciples found themselves faced with THREE MAJOR OBSTACLES: FIRST, they had headed straight into a sudden squall where the winds were at their fiercest and

the waves were at their highest; SECOND, it was the fourth watch, the darkest part of the night; and THIRD AND MOST IMPORTANTLY, Jesus was not with them- they were out there on that sea all alone with no avenue of help or escape available to them. Their despair had to have been TOTAL!

But Jesus, who had sent them out into those tempest-tossed waters in the FIRST place, was NOT going to abandon them. The Bible tells us he makes a bee-line straight towards them, walking upon the waves in order to reach them. When the disciples see him, they mistake him for a ghost, thinking he might be one of those water spirits who inhabits the sea's depths and who has come to drag them back down to the bottom. It was inconceivable to them that the apparition coming toward them could have been their leader for they knew he was safely back on shore, and even if he COULD hear their cries, they knew there wasn't anything he could have done to save them. No, they were doomed and they knew it. All they COULD do in their despair was cry out in sheer terror. But that cry of distress was all the invitation Jesus needed to respond to their plight. As Jesus arrives, he speaks to them the same words of assurance he had spoken so MANY times in the past during moments of great crisis, "Take heart, it is I; have no fear." In that instant, the winds died down and those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Well, that's the story as I best understand it and I ask what lessons can it have for us this morning? I DON'T believe it asking us to believe that Jesus can defy the laws of nature and walk upon water. Rather, Matthew—like the other gospel writers--paints for us a picture to inspire us with, an account to remind us that there is one who is present for us in the FIERCEST of storms and in the DARKEST of nights, one who will never allow us to sink beneath the waves- not now, not EVER. We learn from this story that although we might never see HIM, from his vantage point he does INDEED see US, that he invariably knows where we are and what our situation is far better than we OURSELVES ever can. The fact is that we can NEVER escape his loving gaze REGARDLESS how dark or dire the situation may become. What's more, he doesn't just observe us from a distance but HE ACTS ON OUR BEHALF. He comes to us in our times of need, even when all hope seems lost and our faith feels depleted. Nothing can impede or obstruct his advance- neither the strongest winds nor highest waves nor darkest of nights can keep him from coming to our aid. And when he DOES come, it is often when we LEAST EXPECT HIM, dispelling our fears and comforting us with his words of peace.

Of course, if this is true, it is a rather bold promise. My question to you this morning is this: Can we TRUST it? How can we know WITH ANY ASSURANCE that Christ sees US amid the darkness and the waves? How can we confidently assert that he cares for us enough to come to us when WE most need him, and that he CAN confer upon us a peace deeper and wider than any of our fears?

Several years ago, there was a feature on the NBC Nightly News about a large group of church youth from Washington State who were visiting the beach when two of the boys in the water suddenly found themselves in trouble. One was rescued while the other was caught in a deadly rip tide that dragged him beneath the waves. He was under water nearly a half-hour before the surf rescue team was able to locate him and pull him aboard a jet ski. Once on shore, they spent about ten minutes trying to revive him. Despite nobody thinking he was alive, the

crew--hoping against hope--continued to work on him. Once they got to the hospital, they were surprised to find the young boy had a weak pulse and was breathing. He was subsequently air-lifted to a Portland, Oregon hospital for treatment. After being put in a drug-induced coma for a couple days, he woke up, and a day or two later, they were able to remove his breathing tube. Not only was he able to breathe fine but he had no problems speaking. This boy was clinically dead for close to half an hour and now he is alive and well and doing just fine in what the doctors called nothing short of a miracle. All hope seemed gone for him and yet Christ reached out, took his hand, and placed him firmly and securely back on solid ground.

But as I'm sure we're all aware, that isn't ALWAYS the case. For every miracle one might hear about, there seems to be a hundred that DON'T end quite so miraculously- there tend to be countless MORE instances where the victim dies or is maimed for life and we just credit it as a terrible tragedy. Think of the current war in the Ukraine and the many Christians who have perished on both sides of this conflict. Think of the many sons and daughters of God, our own brothers and sisters in Christ who have lost their lives as a result of all the shooting and bombing that continues to devastate their country- a number that includes the elderly, the infirm, and young children AS WELL. No doubt there were those who called out for Christ to save THEM but unlike those disciples, they never saw HIM walking above the sea, stilling the storm on THEIR behalf. Does it NOT call into question whether we can REALLY trust his promise to always be there for US when WE call out to him?

Waterloo, Iowa, where I ministered for some years, was the home of the five Sullivan brothers who grew up within a couple of blocks of my church. Were you to visit there, you would see that the city's convention center is named after them. The Sullivans were five siblings who all died aboard the same ship--the *U.S.S. Juneau*—while serving in the Pacific during World War II. It was reported that three of the brothers went down with the ship, a fourth drowned the next day, and the fifth survived for five days before being driven insane with grief at the loss of his brothers. He went over the side of his raft never to be seen or heard from again. Having been raised in a devout Catholic home, where was Jesus with his hand reaching out to any of THEM? If we can question why Jesus never came for THEM, how can we ever have the confidence that he will come for US when WE most need his help?

Well, what MY faith has led ME to believe is that Jesus doesn't still the storm on the sea so much as he stills the tempest churning deep WITHIN EACH OF OUR OWN SOULS. Instead of the winds and waves, he calms our hearts and our minds so that outward circumstances never have to overwhelm or control us. He lets us know that we don't have to be afraid, that so long as he is present to us and knows our situation, we CAN have peace. It is perhaps best summed up in a prayer I once heard that went, "Lord, I pray that you help remove the burden which I now bear, but if not, then I ask for a stronger back with which to bear it" and that tends to be the answer God provides US with in most situations. He imbues both our heart and our mind with his own strength, flooding us with his perfect peace, and we find it is always MORE THAN SUFFICIENT to enable us to endure whatever comes our way REGARDLESS how strong the winds, how high the waves, or how dark the night might seem. For you see, the storm "within" is ALWAYS greater than the storm "without" and that is why his word of comfort to the troubled heart is always a greater consolation than stilling the storms that so frequently threaten us. As we learned in our first lesson in Matthew 8, just having Christ with us

at our side when we find ourselves overwhelmed is the ONLY response he ever promises us for it is the only support we will ever NEED. HE HIMSELF becomes the solution to every one of our crises; HE HIMSELF is the answer to every one of our problems. He comes to us again and again and STILL again and he never STOPS coming. If there is peace in our hearts, then we never have to panic or lose hope in the face of distress and adversity, and that includes what is often our GREATEST fear- DEATH. With Christ at our side, we soon discover we never have to fear ANYTHING—not even DYING--ever again!

My friends, the Bible is not some “answer book” intended to provide us with neat and simplistic answers to all of life’s problems. Rather, it is an “ART book” that presents us with the portraits of persons in situations we can readily relate to and how over and over again, we see how God never stops demonstrating his faithfulness toward a people he loves. Well the picture that Matthew has painted for us this morning is meant to inspire us with the promise that during the fourth watch of OUR lives, in those terrifying moments when the winds are at their strongest and the waves are at their highest and the night is at its darkest, Jesus will NO LESS come for US. It means that in those times we find ourselves overwhelmed by chaotic and often catastrophic circumstances well beyond our control, we never have to give up or surrender faith or lose hope. Although we might not see HIM, Jesus ALWAYS sees US, maintaining a watchful eye for the first sign that something is wrong. And NOTHING can or will stop his coming- NOT EVEN THOSE TEN FOOT WAVES. He walks towards us over the waters of crisis and tragedy to remind us of his love and abiding presence, to afford us those same words of consolation he gave to his struggling disciples- "Take heart, it is I; have no fear." Thus TRUE faith is trusting that he is here WITH us and FOR us even when we can’t see or hear or feel his presence, when all we have to go on is his word of promise that he will never leave or forsake us, when all we can do is hold onto his claim that he will always be there at our side when we need him most. If we do, we TOO will discover his ability to calm OUR hearts and allay OUR fears TODAY even as he did the hearts of his own disciples TWO THOUSAND YEARS AGO; and it TOO will lead US to fall down and declare even as it did THEM, “Truly YOU ARE the Son of God!” Let us pray...

*Heavenly Father, imprint this picture of Jesus coming to the aid of his disciples firmly upon our hearts and minds this morning so that we might never forget it. May we know that we know that we know that you watch over us as a hen cares for her brood, and that you promise to never leave our side- EVER! In his name we pray. Amen.*