

“Water Walkers”
Sermon by Rev. Peter Shidemantle
Pebble Hill Presbyterian Church
8th Sunday after Pentecost - August 7, 2011
Matthew 14:22-33

In the Bible, the sea is the symbol of chaos: its sheer abundance and overwhelming power represents the forces that are opposed in every way to God’s creation. As Karl Barth put it, water “is a representative of all the evil powers which oppress and resist the salvation intended for the people of Israel.” Throughout the Old Testament this is the reality over which God’s power is demonstrated – in the creation itself where God establishes order out of the watery chaos, in the covenant with Noah after the great flood, in the mighty act of deliverance from Pharaoh’s army at the Red Sea, and in the miraculous entry into the Promised Land through the swollen Jordan River. The Lord triumphs over the waters, over all that would threaten and thwart God’s purposes.

And one of the oldest symbols of the church is a boat, coming from our gospel reading this morning, and other gospel stories that take place in boats. The church is symbolized as a boat that is tossed this way and that by the threatening and destructive forces of the world – not a safe haven safely hidden away from these forces, but as a boat making its way in the middle of them. It makes perfect sense that this would be so, for the powers of sin and evil, like the forces and currents of the sea, threaten to make a wreck of life – and the church seeks to steer its way through this world, trying to stay upright in goodness and righteousness, witnessing to God’s order of mercy and peace. The word “nave,” the old word for what we often call the sanctuary (Some still insist on it!), is related to the word “navigate” – and is symbolic of the community of Christian believers that seeks to make its way and stay afloat in the middle of the storms of the world. This church/nave/sanctuary was designed in just such a way – as you can see if you look, especially from the

outside.

Sometimes the sailing is just fine. The waters are calm and the breezes are gentle. But then the winds pick up, the water gets choppy, and before you know it you're in the middle of the storm. Smooth sailing often gives us the illusion of control; it feels like we are "on top of the world." But when the storms come, and we are afraid of going under, it seems that there is no earthly power that can save us. In the Bible it is only God who has power over the chaos of the waters. God creates order out of chaos; God calms the storms. God is Lord of the Sea. It is God who saves us from perishing in the storm.

Our gospel lesson this morning literally preaches itself. It always has.

But when we study, or pray with, or preach from a piece of scripture, especially these graphic scenes and stories about the encounters and actions of Jesus with others, it is good to follow and trace the movement of the text – where it starts and where it finishes, and what's going on in between. This is how it preaches to us, how we might find ourselves within it.

For the disciples in the boat that night it began in fear, and it ended in worship. Jesus had sent them to the other side of the lake, while he spent time in prayer. But as it got toward morning the winds kicked up and the waves grew, and they were afraid. Suddenly they see something or someone coming toward them on top of the water. They think it's a ghost, a figure of death, a sign they were surely on their way to a watery grave – lost in the depths of the chaos. But when they saw that it wasn't a ghost, but Jesus himself, he told them not to be afraid, that it was him. "Do not be afraid" is a keynote of the gospel. When God speaks, when angels speak, when Jesus speaks – the first word so often is, "Fear not."

There are lots of reasons to be afraid, lots of things to be afraid of. It is a natural response when we come up against the unknown, when sad or tragic news or events are

suddenly upon us and everything changes. Sometimes we fear for our very lives, and even more, for the life of someone we love. The disciples that night were afraid of Jesus, too, “terrified,” Matthew says, until he spoke to them. “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” Take heart – find your heart again. Instinct kicks in when fear overtakes us. It’s not that Jesus dispels their fear – he overtakes it. He assures us in our fear that he is there. The word of God comes to us in our fear and offers that heart-connection. It isn’t as if disciples of Jesus are never afraid, but rather that he comes to us in our fears, reminding us of who he is.

But that isn’t where it ends, as if that were the goal of our relationship with God, our discipleship of Jesus – a people whose fears are overcome – and it’s smooth sailing from now on. The goal of the spiritual life, life in Christ, is not to find peace, but to know God – and in that journey we can be assured that troubles are coming, for God is as much a troubler of souls as God is a healer of souls. God’s word is continually calling us to the depths of life, to a heart-connection with a troubled world, sending us to the “other side,” which brings fears of its own. For the early Christians the “other side” of the lake was the land of the gentiles, the mission field of the early church. It represents for us that we’re not just bobbing about in the sea, but we’re going somewhere. We have a Great Commission to follow. We have a God and neighbors to love and serve with open hearts and hands and minds.

Peter was the only one that night to risk it. Among other things fear can do, it can act as a motivator. It seemed to do that for Peter, motivating him to risk moving toward Jesus in the storm. But fear sometimes also mingles with distraction, and taking his eyes off Jesus Peter “noticed” the wind and began to sink. And he cried out, “Lord, save me!” and Jesus reached out his hand and caught him, saying “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” We don’t know the tone of Jesus’ voice when he said this, but I like to think that

his tone of voice wasn't angry and scolding, but more amused and even playful. Peter stepped toward Jesus because Jesus had never failed him. But still the strong winds scared him. His risk created an even deeper trust in the steadfast love and grace that continues to save.

Peter may have had only a little faith, but he was the only one to get out of the boat – and anyway, as Jesus had recently taught them, faith even the size of a mustard seed can move a mountain, and as he demonstrated, 5,000 people can be fed out of one lunch pail. We know how one believer who risks boldly and moves toward the call of Jesus can make a difference in the lives of other believers. But this is what God calls us all to do and be – assuring us that if we “get out of the boat” we can count on the accompaniment of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Will Willimon put it well in a sermon entitled “How Will You Know If It's Jesus?”:

“If Peter had not ventured forth, had not obeyed the call to walk on the water, then Peter would never have had this great opportunity for recognition of Jesus and rescue by Jesus. I wonder if too many of us are merely splashing about in the safe shallows and therefore have too few opportunities to test and deepen our faith. The story today implies if you want to be close to Jesus, you have to venture forth out on the sea, you have to prove his promises through trusting his promises, through risk and venture.”

But there's yet one more move. “When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying ‘Truly you are the Son of God.’” The story begins in terror, and ends in worship. A little faith had the power to transform a small band of fearful followers into a joyful worshiping community. Fear turns you in on yourself; worship turns you outward to God – from the many worldly things to the one heavenly thing. Whatever we bring with us to worship is God-directed – our fears, our hopes, our sorrows and our joys, failures and successes – those things we dare not mention and those

things we're busting to tell. As we will declare in a few moments as we gather at the table, we rejoice that the Lord is with us in this stormy time in our nation and world, and where the waves crash around us in our own lives. We lift up our hearts to the one who lifts us up from the depths of despair. We give thanks to the Lord our God, the Lord of the Sea, the God who brings both holy trouble and holy peace.

Our worship is central to all that we do, all that we are as church and Christian believers. We may not always do it to everyone's liking, but that's less important than our doing it. It grounds us in the word of God, feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation, blesses us with the waters of baptism. The response of the disciples that early morning is still the response of a grateful church, as we experience the impossible presence of Christ in the midst of our life, in our ministry and mission – the one of whom we continue to sing, in the words a beloved hymn of the church: "Fairest Lord Jesus, ruler of all nature, O thou of God to earth come down, Thee will I cherish, Thee will I honor, Thou, my soul's glory, joy and crown."