

## Jesus Invites

Let's think for a few minutes what it was like for the disciples, Jesus' friends & followers, on the dark and stormy night that is the subject of our Bible reading today.

It had been a loooooong day, a very long & difficult day. It had begun with the news that John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin, the one who had baptized Jesus, had been arrested by King Herod, and put to death. Surely this meant that Jesus and his disciples were in danger for their lives. So, Jesus asked the disciples to row him across the Sea of Galilee to a place in the wilderness where he could pray. However, the people from the towns of Galilee were so hungry for Jesus' teaching that when they saw where he was going, they walked along the shore and got there before he did. Jesus had compassion on all these people who were struggling, who were searching for God. And so he spent the day telling them of God's love, forgiveness, and peace... God's place for them in His kingdom. And he healed the sick & the troubled. Then in the evening, he blessed 5 loaves & 2 fish, and fed the entire crowd, before blessing them and sending them home. Now, at last, he could spend some time in prayer. So, he sent the disciples home in their boat, and he walked a ways into the hills to pray.

A long day for the disciples... filled with blessings and ministering to the people... and now they were exhausted and just wanted to get home to their own beds. However, as they rowed across the lake, the clouds moved in, covering the moon & stars... in the darkness, the wind picked up, stronger & stronger, rocking the boat, waves crashing against the vessel, filling it with water... they rowed, harder and harder, but they were making no progress... there, in the middle of the lake, it was sure that the boat was going to sink and they would all drown.

We can relate. Maybe not to being caught in a storm during the night... but we can relate to being caught in the storms of life, to feeling like we are overwhelmed, that we will drown in the stresses of life. You may be dealing with a difficult situation with your family. It might be something that's happening at school or at work. Maybe something in your personal life that is overwhelming. You may be facing a health crisis... or the floods of grief & loss... And here at church, there's the uncertainty as I get ready to retire and you prepare for a new pastor. Yes, like the disciples, we often find ourselves facing a dark and stormy night.

And then, as they rowed with all their might, straining against the storm, they thought they saw a figure, a gleam of light, coming toward them... it looked like... it looked like Jesus. He was walking toward them on the water... no, their eyes must be playing tricks on them... they were seeing things in their exhaustion... Was it a ghost? What was happening? Then Jesus spoke, "Courage."

"Courage." "Take heart." "Be encouraged." It was what Jesus said next that began to give them hope: "It is I." They weren't alone. Jesus was there with them. And more than that... these words were a powerful quote from the Scriptures... these were the words that God spoke to Moses from the Burning Bush... "It is I." Jesus had come with God's power... In the scriptures, only God the Creator walks on the waters... This was a sign of God's presence. "Do not be afraid."

This is what Jesus says to us today: "Courage." "Take heart... no matter what it is that you are facing..." Are you dealing with illness? "Take heart." Grief? "Take heart." Difficult decisions? "Take heart." Change? "Take heart."

Why? Because Jesus is with us. Jesus, God's own Son, with all God's love, and strength, and power. "Do not be afraid."

Now, this Biblical account is summed up in 5 mighty words... these words form a kind of outline of the text... these words form a kind of framework for us, in stormy times...

The first word is Jesus' word, "Courage." The second word is Peter's word, "Lord." Lord. With this word, Peter expresses his trust in Jesus. He acknowledges that Jesus is the one he will turn to for direction, guidance, and strength. And then, Peter makes an unusual request. We expect him to say, "Lord, please calm the storm." After all, Jesus had already done that once before. Or, maybe, Peter will ask, "Lord, please get in the boat with us, so we're safe..." But that's not what Peter says. He says, "Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water." Wow! Just "wow!" Peter is willing to step out of the relative safety of the boat... willing to step into the unknown with all its dangers... willing to facing the danger of drowning in the chaos of the storm... because that's where Jesus is. He wants to be with Jesus.

Jesus comes to us in the storms of life. It's the hardest thing in the world, but Jesus invites us to say to him, "Lord." "Lord, I trust you." "Lord, this is difficult, and I'm scared, but help me come to you, out of the safety of the past, into the future you have planned for me."

The third word is Jesus' word: "Come." Jesus wants us with him. Jesus knows the struggles we face, and he responds with deep love, with caring, with forgiveness, with encouragement, with strength... Jesus knows the plans God has for us, plans (as the Bible promises in Jeremiah 29:11) plans for welfare and not for harm, to give us a future and a hope... "Come."

So, Peter gets out of the boat... and begins to walk across the stormy sea toward Jesus... He keeps his focus on Jesus, step by step... Then, Peter looks down. In the darkness, he is surrounded by the power of the wind, the mighty waves, the deep waters, his heart begins to pound in his chest, and immediately, he begins to sink. In desperation, he cries out, “Lord, save me.”

“Save me.” No matter how hard we try to keep our focus on Jesus, we get distracted. Our problems are so large, our difficulties so confusing... our stress overwhelms us. Fears and worries so fill our minds, that there is little room for faith. “Save me,” we cry out to the Lord.

Peter is going under... he reaches his hand toward Jesus... and Jesus grasps his hand with a firm grip, pulling him up out of the water... no doubt, embracing him, enfolding him in warmth and love, and together they walk across the stormy sea to the disciples’ boat... and when they get in, the wind ceases, the storm is over... “Truly...” say the disciples as they worship Jesus, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

“Truly.” That’s the 5<sup>th</sup> word... Jesus spoke first: “Courage.” Then Peter, “Lord.” Jesus responded, “Come.” Peter cried out, “Save.” Now all the disciples speak: “Truly.”

You see, when we are at that point in our life when we lose our focus, and the storms overwhelm us, Jesus reaches out to us with his strong hand. He sets us on our feet again, embraces us with warmth and love, and walks with us to the boat which will take us into the future. No doubt there will be storms again, but for now, the wind & rain cease... and we worship God, with praise & thanksgiving, for we know now... we know that “Truly, Jesus is the Son of God.”

Truly. Amen.

God planned this scripture text, the music, and this sermon many weeks ago. And it is especially timely—God’s timing is always perfect—because Renée Stewart has an announcement to share with you now, on behalf of the Staff-Parish Relations Team.