

Sermon preached by the Reverend Margie Baker at St. John's Episcopal Church

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Proper 14, Year A

In Hebrew scripture, water often represents chaos. Think back to the first chapter of Genesis. "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters."¹ Before God could create land, or plants, or humans, God first had to create a dome to hold back the water above and below. This sounds foreign to you and me, but it's how the Hebrew people thought of their world- a God-protected bubble surrounded on all sides by chaotic waters: ocean and outer space both pressing in, and only God keeping them at bay. In the creation, God carves away a safe space for life out of the chaos, out of the water. This is reflected in the story of the flood later in Genesis. It's not just that it rains; no, we hear that "all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened."² The chaos kept at bay by God in creation erupts from below and above. It's the unmaking of creation, chaos reclaiming the world.

This understanding of water and chaos is at the heart of how I hear today's gospel reading. The disciples are stuck in the sea in the dark of night, waves crashing and a wind raging: it recalls the chaos that God tames in creation, the chaos erupting in the story of Noah. I imagine Matthew's community, a Jewish Christian community facing persecution, probably heard those echoes in the story as well. Immersed ourselves in the continuing storms of COVID, injustice, the tragedy in Beirut, and a literal storm that left so many of us without power this past week, it does me good to hear that Jesus meets us in the chaos and helps us through.

If it feels like you've heard this story before, you have. This is one of the more famous miracles, one that we may even tune out from overuse. What's more, this story is similar

¹ Genesis 1:1-2 NRSV

² Gen 7:11b NRSV

to several others in the gospels. It feels like a variation on a theme. Mark and John also have a story of Jesus walking on water in a storm, but without Peter's miraculous walk. Additionally, Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell another similar story of when the disciples and Jesus are on a boat, and Jesus is asleep as a storm rages. They wake him in their fear and he calms the storm.³ All the storm stories point to Jesus' divinity and power, his ability to curb the chaos; they all name the disciples' fear of what is beyond their control; they all name their doubt.

Since the days of the early church, these stories have been seen allegorically. The boat is the Church; the waters are life's trials, temptations, and pain; and Jesus is Jesus, the only way for the Church to pass safely over life's waters. Reading the story allegorically, it becomes something bigger than what it literally is. It carries more hope for those of us who feel buffeted by the waters. We followers of Jesus are like a boat trying to cross the sea, and the waters below can be dangerous and the storms above come with no warning. The Church offers some protection from the waters and waves, but it is not unsinkable. The Church is a human creation, made by human hands and not always a match for the waves it encounters. The Church yearns for the other side, for the kingdom of God, for the heavenly Jerusalem, but yearning like rowing will only get you so far. It is Christ who calms the storm, just as it is Christ who can glide above the waters of doubt, worry, and temptation. Through God's grace the boat reaches the other side. Just as God tamed the chaos at the Creation, so Jesus calms the storm and offers safe passage.

This allegorical understanding is present in all of those Jesus versus storm stories, but today's passage is special: only Matthew tells the story of Peter attempting to walk on the water. Only in this story do we watch as Peter takes those first steps, gliding on the waters like Jesus, only to be frightened by the wind and waves, to sink, to be pulled out of the chaos by Jesus. All the stories put fear and doubt in the hearts of the disciples as a whole. Only here do we see its effects on one man, on an individual, and one so eager

³ Matt 8:23-27, Mark 4:35-41 NRSV, Luke 8:22-25

to step out in faith. Peter the impetuous, Peter the rock, Peter who loves Jesus so very much. “You of little faith,” Jesus says, “why did you doubt?” If this feels harsh, remember that Jesus will rebuke Peter much more harshly later- Get behind me, Satan! Peter has faith, but not enough to steady him on the water when he lets his gaze fall away from Jesus. Not enough when he begins thinking about the wind instead of his goal. Why did Peter doubt? Because the wind and waves grew too large. And Peter called out to the Lord who was right there, ready to help.

Augustine said, My soul is restless until it finds its rest in thee, O God. Perhaps what we learn from Peter is about the inner storms we all face, the inner chaos, the waves of fear, all of which can only be calmed by God. My soul is restless until it finds its rest in thee. A life of prayer and continual turning to God is a life where, little by little, we learn to walk above the waves. Little by little we learn to pay less attention to the wind and keep our eyes on Jesus. Little by little we learn that we can step out above the chaos and make big, bold leaps of faith. We too can be like Peter, who gathers the courage to step out of the boat and be a little more like Christ. And we too can fail boldly and know that Jesus will lift us out of the chaos, the fear, the worry, will help us stay afloat.

What storms and winds keep us, the followers of Jesus, from our call and make us fear that we won't make it? What sea of trouble, what storm are we in? There are personal storms and collective ones, private and universal chaos. Whatever the storm, whatever the chaos, I invite us all to take to heart Augustine's words: my soul is restless until it rests in thee. Whatever the chaos we face, Jesus promises to calm the inner storm and to lift us above the waters even as we drown. Jesus calms the storm by his mere presence, and lifts us from the waters when we call. This is what a life of prayer *is*: it's taking time to simply *be* with God, to rest in God, and to call on God when it all gets to be too much.

Perhaps you find yourself caught in the storm of grief, or illness, sinking beneath the waters of anxiety, unemployment, substance abuse, or fear. Perhaps you are overwhelmed by the chaos of our common life in this community, this nation, or the

world, by COVID, economic disparities, injustice, racism, polarization, or disaster. Rest in God; let our souls be calmed like the winds on the sea of Galilee, so that we can better handle the storms the world throws our way. My soul is restless until it finds its rest in thee. AMEN.