

Reach out and take the hand
Matthew 14:22-33

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. May the words of my mouth and the ears of our hearts be open to the word of God this day. AMEN.

A light breeze and sunshine, a lapping noise of water against a boat, perhaps a slight spray of water every once in a while covering the deck as you float along in your cabin cruiser boat fishing the day away, a vacationers dream. It might be the ideal way for many people to relieve their jumpy nerves and stress, just a few hours out on the boat, relaxing and enjoying the beautiful day.

But this isn't the ideal vacation dream, when the dark clouds roll in and the waves are rising and falling. The wind turns quickly into a gale and the slight splash of sea spray turns into waves seething and cracking over the bow threatening to capsize the boat. Suddenly that little relaxed picture of peace and tranquility is gone. It is one of the scariest, helpless moments in any sailors life, when a boat is seized by the vastness of nature and the fury of the storms tosses them all about – up and down. There is no place to hide, no storm cellar to run to, no small inner space to lock yourself into, no ambulance or police department to come and help you. The bravest of souls can be crumbled into total fear in situations like this.

And that is the scene of our group of disciples are experiencing in our Gospel reading today. They set sail across the Sea of Galilee, when the weather was still fine. But off the mountains comes a storm of wind and torment, a sudden change that distressing the rowers. The wind is against them the waves are plowing into them forcing them this way and that, totally out of control. They could have been right at that moment cursing themselves, they knew better, some of them were ex-fishermen, they knew the signs of coming storms. Or perhaps as the winds blew against them through the night they were grumbling about Jesus, their leader who had ordered them to go in this boat at night across the sea. Perhaps they were blaming him at this fearful moment far from shore, "Its Jesus' fault that we are in this mess", "where is he when we need him", "why isn't he doing any thing to save us".

But little do they know, what Jesus' great design was in this story. They had just experienced a high moment in the ministry. Jesus had just fed 5000 men besides the woman and children, after spending the entire day healing and comforting all the people that were in need. Now well feed and elated about the great meal, the crowd is buzzing with excitement with other plans for Jesus. "He says the right things, he has power over sickness, and he even feeds us, let's make him king, a new king for Israel". The temptation of an earthly kingdom might have been too much for the disciples to handle at this time. So before this enthusiasm gets to out of control, Jesus sends the disciples away by boat promising to come to them later.

He knew they were too spiritually immature to stand up against the appeal of power that the crowds were offering him, so he remained to dismiss the crowds and end this day.

Now just a few hours later, the disciples who had been so close to becoming the inner court of the new king of Israel are finding themselves swamped in despair, far out to sea. They could have been riding high on popularity and power, but instead they were riding low in a boat battered by waves, facing sinking and destruction and death. Where was Jesus, why wasn't he there, why did he do this – could have easily been their thoughts.

But now it is near the dawn, the last part of the night, when the world looks the darkest, especially in a storm, of wind and waves. At that darkness and despair, the men on the boat see a moving image, and cold terror is added to their dilemma of rowing all night against a fierce wind. Now what bad omen is coming their way this far out at sea in this storm, what could that be, a ghost, a vision of fear, a specter of death. And the men were terrified and they cry out in fear.

But then Jesus calms them by calling out, "Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid." And in that moment the impulsive Peter calls out, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." And Christ calls him to come. And so he does just that, comes out climbing over the side of the boat and heads towards Jesus. Peter must have had some tremendous faith to step out like that, well at least for a time. Because not before too long does he notice where he is, the waves and wind blowing against him and he starts to go under. While he was looking and concentrating on Jesus he was okay, but when he noticed the wind and the storm, he quickly had doubts and fears take over and he began to sink.

And right then at that lowest moment, Jesus again extends his hand to help, catching him and pulling him back up to life. He is saved. And they get in the boat, and the winds stop, the violent blowing gales end, the waves stop battering them all about, and peace comes upon them. The seas itself obeys the Lord. And now the men who were in the boat, seeing what just happened, acknowledge that Jesus must surely be the Son of God.

Of course this is a miracle story, the men in that boat and especially Peter must know that this is a miracle of Jesus showing his glory and his grace. That is the whole point to this story, the Authority and Grace of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God. God has broken into this world and now shows his power over creation and his ability to give salvation and it had to change the understanding of those disciples from that moment on. Whenever Jesus performed his miracles it was to show a purpose. He wasn't just showing off, or accomplishing a set of hurdles that showed his levels of abilities. He was revealing to them and to us the very nature of the Kingdom of God, the very nature of God's love and compassion. He was showing them the meaning of faith, and the power of being in relationship with God. On this night on the sea

he was illustrating the very real truth that no time, no space, no storm, no fear can remove God from us. Nothing can separate us from the Love of God and his compassionate hand.

Obviously the fierce storms still have their way of coming upon us. We can be feeling light breezes or even full out gusts of hurricanes, blowing against us every day, impeding our life, fighting against us, trying to tear us apart and destroy us, be it spiritual battles of faith, physical ailments or sickness, financial or relationship battles that are pulling us apart. All people feel these storms of life, there is no difference between those who are faithful Christians and those who reject God, all of humanity faces adversity and temptations, pains and sorrows. Just because we have faith doesn't mean that we are immune to having distress. But faith does give us a hand to grab hold of in the midst of the problems and the perils of despair. We are given the promise of God with us in the midst of the problems and storms of life.

The early church, and the very Christians of Matthew's audience, would have found great hope in this miracle story. Matthew was writing to a Jewish audience of Christians, ones that had been converted and lived now, rejected by family and old friends, ones that faced exile, abandonment, hatred, and ridicule. On top of this many would have found strength and comfort in this miracle story when confronted by campaigns to wipe out the Christians. Nero and other dictators that tried over those first years to eliminate and kill Christians in horrible and dehumanizing ways. And these early Christians, no matter what the terror, took comfort in knowing that Jesus was always nearing holding out his hand, telling them not to be afraid.

Of course we could get skeptical and wonder what good it did them, many of those Christians died painful deaths. "Where was Jesus", "why didn't he help them", "Why didn't he save them."

But such thoughts as that remind us to again hear the true work that Jesus was doing. Jesus was not breaking into this world to become an earthly lifesaver, but instead he came to give us eternal life. We are in the hands of God, he comes to us in times of need and helps us, and yet we know eventually death does come to us, and in that moment we know whose hand it is that reaches out to us and says do not be afraid. Come to me.

When the world looks the darkest, especially in a storms of life physical, spiritual, mentally tasking winds that come to drive us down, we need to see that promise of Christ, who comes to us out of the darkness and gives us the hand to walk with him, and tells us to not be afraid. May we always seek that one who stands calling us by name, now and always, Amen. May the Peace and grace of God be with you this day and throughout the week to come. Amen