

Proper 14A August 13, 2017 (Matthew 14:22-33)

Did you ever get in trouble for doing the right thing? It happens often enough!

Whistleblowers get in trouble for telling the truth. Sometimes they lose their jobs.

The same goes for people who tell the boss what the boss doesn't want to hear.

"Don't shoot the messenger," we say. "I didn't cause the problem. I just want you know about it." But sometimes they shoot the messenger anyway. Or what about the doctor who stops to help an accident victim and ends up getting sued!

That's what happened to Jesus' disciples. Jesus told the disciples to get into a boat and travel to the other side. He didn't join them for the journey, but instead went off by himself to pray. It was Jesus' idea—not theirs—for his disciples to start their journey at nightfall. The disciples were not being foolish, but obedient.

Keep in mind that the disciples had a big day, feeding thousands of people. They were tired—but Jesus told them to get into the boat and go to the other side—so that's what they did. After getting out to sea—miles from nowhere—a storm hit—a pretty big one. If you have ever been in a small boat in a storm, you know what that was like. The wind was against them, so they were making little headway. Some of them wanted to turn around, but others protested that they were halfway there. It was the early hours of the morning, and they had struggled all night to keep the boat afloat. Without sleep! Just imagine how exhausted they must have been. And the darkness! Just imagine how dark it must have been! In the middle of a storm, there's no moonlight—no starlight.

Three miles from shore, they couldn't see light in any direction. I can't imagine how they stayed on course. The dawn was beginning to creep over the horizon. Just imagine how glad they must have been to see the first glimmer of light after their night at sea in a storm! Even though the waves were battering the boat, the story doesn't say that the disciples were afraid—but they must have been a little bit afraid. Sailors know the dangers—and some of Jesus' disciples were professional fishermen. They knew how to take care of themselves on the sea, but they also knew good men who had died in storms. Fishing was, and is, a dangerous life, and they knew it. Some of them must have been asking themselves why Jesus would send us into such a night—into such danger—with no sleep. Why couldn't they have waited until morning? Why did Jesus make them start the journey as night was falling? Why didn't he come with them? After hearing this story of the disciples at sea, we need to know what was happening as Matthew was writing this gospel- many years after it happened. As Matthew was writing his Gospel, Romans were persecuting Christians. Those Christians, like the disciples in the boat, were just trying to obey Jesus, but like the men in the boat they were caught up in a storm that was not of their making. Like the disciples in the boat, they were trying to do what Jesus wanted them to do, but things were going badly. The story of the disciples in the boat was also, in a sense, the story of the persecuted Christians of Matthew's day. So Matthew is telling two stories simultaneously: The first is the story of the disciples caught in a storm at sea. The second is the story of his church, many years later, caught up in the storm of persecution.

- If the disciples in that little boat were asking why Jesus had ordered them into the boat at such an inopportune time, Matthew's church was also wondering why Jesus wasn't protecting them from persecution.
- If the disciples in the boat felt that they were suffering for doing the right thing, the Christians of Matthew's church must have felt the same way.

And, in a sense, Matthew is not telling just two stories, but many. The story of the disciples caught up in the storm is the story of every Christian whose faith brings adversity rather than prosperity. You might think that Jesus would not allow obedient Christians to suffer, but he does. It happens every day. Christians around the world today are being persecuted, just as they were in the days of the Roman Coliseum. We are now very aware of the persecution that Christians are experiencing in Islamic nations around the world—Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Malaysia, and many others. Christians are also being persecuted in China, India, and other nations. Their only crime, is following Jesus. They are very much like the disciples in the boat—obeying Jesus, but caught up in a storm.

Albert Schweitzer experienced the frustrations of Christian discipleship—of following Jesus—of obeying Christ. Schweitzer had been a renowned organist and philosopher in Paris. But, following the call of Christ, at age thirty he went back to school to become a physician—so that he might follow Christ's call to go to Africa to start a medical mission. I admire Schweitzer, because he gave up so much—to do so much more.

But, as every pastor or doctor can understand, Schweitzer sometimes became discouraged. He prescribed treatments that had the potential to cure diseases, but patients failed to do their part. Schweitzer described one of his "down" moments. This is what he said:

"One day, in my despair, I threw myself into a chair in the consulting room and groaned out, 'What a blockhead I was to come out here to doctor savages like these!' Whereupon Joseph my coworker quietly remarked, 'Yes, doctor, here on earth you are a great blockhead, but not in Heaven.'"

So the story of the disciples in the boat is many stories. It's the story of Matthew's persecuted church. It's the story of persecuted Christians around the world today. It's the story of faithful Christians going through hardship. It might also be your story. You might be trying to follow Jesus, but experiencing hardship also—depression—a marriage unraveling—children headed in the wrong direction—whatever. It happens. One of the lessons that we need to take from this story is that Jesus does not always spare faithful Christians from hardship. Even the faithful, experience hardship. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that God, "makes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust" (Matthew 5:45). We need to hear that, because otherwise we might assume that, somehow, we have failed God. We might believe that God is punishing us for some wrong that we have done. The truth is that, some suffering does come directly from our sins, but not all suffering. "God makes his sun to rise on the evil and the good." Those were Jesus' words.

It's especially important that we understand this, or we will try to convince some poor soul that their suffering is the result of their sin. The truth is that we don't know that it is a direct result of their sin. Some suffering does come directly from sin—but that's not always the case. We live in a world in which joy and sorrow exist side by side, and we all experience some of each. Even good Christians sometimes find themselves in the middle of a storm—a storm not of their making. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "Everyone therefore who hears these words of mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man, who built his house on a rock. The rain came down, the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat on that house; and it didn't fall, for it was founded on the rock" (7:24-25). Jesus doesn't promise that we won't experience the storms of life. He does promise that we will come through them whole. In this Gospel lesson of the disciples on the sea, Jesus came to them in the midst of the storm saying, "It is I! Don't be afraid" (v. 27). He was telling them to have courage, because "It is I." The Greek that is translated "It is I," is *ego eimi*. A literal translation is simply "I am." That phrase, "I am", has great significance in the Bible. In Exodus 3, when Moses encountered God in the burning bush, he asked God's name. God said that his name was "I AM WHO I AM." Then God said, "You shall tell the children of Israel this, 'I AM has sent me to you'" (Exodus 3:14). So when Jesus says, "I AM," he is using God's name. He is telling the disciples that he is the presence of God with them in the midst of their storm. He has come to be with them—and he has come to save them. As he says these words, the storm continues to rage, but, after awhile, he gets into the boat and the wind quits blowing.

I believe that Matthew's church would hear that as a promise, that someday, the storm of persecution would stop raging around them. I believe that we can hear this as a promise that the storms of our lives will someday stop raging around us. It's a promise that Christ will be with us in the storm—and that Christ will redeem us from the storm. As I reflect upon my life, I'm aware that I have lived through many storms—many frightening and uncomfortable times. I don't like storms—I prefer my weather mild and sunny! During the times that I found myself caught up in storms, I didn't understand why it should be so. I was trying to serve God—to be faithful. I was working hard—trying to do the right thing. Why wasn't my life easier? Now, as I look back on those storms from the larger perspective of a longer life, I can see that some of those experiences helped to shape my life in ways that easy times could not have done. They chipped off some of my sharp edges and resculpted me so that I am closer to being the person that God intends me to be. That kind of chipping and sculpting cannot be done with a soft cloth. It requires a hammer and chisel. It involves pain. I didn't enjoy the storms, but they showed that God had not given up on me. I thank God for not giving up on me. I am also aware that I am not yet the person that God wants me to be, so I'm sure that I can continue to expect storms in my future. Whatever the storm that you might be experiencing, be aware that Christ comes to you in the midst of that storm. He comes to help you—to change you—to redeem you—to save you. He says, "Take heart. Be of good courage. It is I, the presence of God in your midst. Don't be afraid." In the days ahead, you will face many storms. Some of them will be little squalls that pass by quickly, but others will be full-blown hurricanes.

Get ready! Invite Jesus to join you--to come into your heart--to direct your life--to guide you day-by-day and moment-by-moment. If you will do that, when the storms come, you will be O.K. By the grace of God, you will be O.K. Whether in life or in death (PAUSE), you will be O.K. Amen!