

“Make a Splash?”

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1 Kings 1:9-18

Matthew 14:22-33

How about that storm on Tuesday? If we were together in the worship space, I would ask, “How many of you lost power? If so, how many days did you lose it? How many of you had big tree limbs, or worse, a whole tree fall on your property? How many of you had to mop up flooding in your basement?” Maybe you can briefly share your storm stories in the comments section of our Facebook page. As for my family, we were driving back from a short vacation, and as it turns out we drove right through the storm. By the time we got to Leonia, the sun was trying to peek out. But I have never seen Chris’ knuckles turn as white as they were when they were gripping the steering wheel. I was looking down for a moment, when suddenly my body and the car were moving in a different direction from where we had headed. There was an uneven groove in the road, which made a perfect slip and slide for our car as we hydroplaned across lanes. It was terrifying, and strangely in the moment of hydroplaning I felt a moment of clear-headed focus as I calculated what was happening and all the possible outcomes; it was only *after* Chris had the car back under control that my body was awash in heart-jumping panic. It took both of us several minutes before that feeling of panic had left our bodies, even after we were safe again.

I wonder if that’s the kind of feeling that the disciples had when they were in that boat on the Sea of Galilee. The gospel tells us they were “battered by the waves” and “far from the land, for the wind was against them.” Needless to say, fear gripped them. And I imagine it wasn’t just the storm which had the disciples so unsettled. The Greek word for what the water does to the boat and disciples in it, *basanizomenon*, means “torture” and can also have political connotations. You should know that the beginning of this same chapter tells of John the Baptist, who had been imprisoned under Herod, executed by beheading, with his head on a platter as a gift for his daughter, who danced so alluringly for Herod’s birthday that he promised her whatever she wanted.

So as the jostling waves mixed up the contents of the disciples’ stomachs, I wonder if they also took that chance to indulge their fears of all the persecutions they may endure for following in Jesus’ name. bell hooks writes of courage and fear in cultures like ours: “Cultures of domination rely on the cultivation of fear as a way to ensure obedience. In our society we make much of love and say little about fear. Yet we are all terribly afraid most of the time. As a culture we are obsessed with the notion of safety. Yet we do not question why we live in states of extreme

anxiety and dread. Fear is the primary force upholding structures of domination.” When Jesus told them all not to fear, I wonder if he knew how much fear fueled the rulership of the unrighteous.

For us, likewise, these days storms aren't the only things gripping us with fear. I know many parents who, like myself, whether they have decided to send their kids in to school, or to keep them home to learn virtually, agonize over their decision with fears that perhaps it was the wrong one. I feel a particular compassion for the elderly. As they carefully shelter and try to avoid risks like crowds, at the same time they wonder whether they will ever again see the day when they might comfortably and safely attend a lecture at the library, chair yoga at the rec, or an evening with dinner and drinks in a friend's home. Looking longingly back at the shore, they wonder when or if they will feel the security of dry, firm land again. Don't get me wrong: there is lots to be hopeful about! There are many promising signs of success with vaccines. Hospitals are getting smarter and more effective at how they treat COVID-19. And though New Jersey has had a recent bump in numbers, we have still made vast improvements, thanks to careful policy and individual and community buy-in to keep our numbers down. But while these breaks in the clouds let the sun shine through, it is hard to ignore the waves whipping beside us, tossing us about in our boat.

In these moments, we wonder, where in the world is Jesus? As for the disciples, Jesus is the one who encouraged them to get into the boat in the first place! They wouldn't have been in this boat if not for him.

Yet Jesus was taking some much-needed Sabbath time, alone on a mountain. The last time it said Jesus had tried to find a deserted place by himself, the crowds followed him, and so he ended up curing many and preaching, and multiplying a few loaves and fish to feed thousands of hungry listeners. I also wonder if he needed some space to process and grieve the death of his friend, his cousin, his fellow evangelist John who baptized Jesus. I can respect that after something like that, he needed some practices of self-care and spiritual restoration. I think scripture has a message for all of us: if we want to do the work to bring forth God's holy community, we need to take time to do what renews us spiritually. For my family, that meant going yesterday up to Vermont, taking a different kind of boat-- we had to take our car on a ferry boat across Lake Champlaine-- and on the other side, near Burlington, we met our newest family member. Meet Mister Kofi, our new rescue puppy. I know that the rhythms and care and love a puppy needs also centers me, and makes me feel like my life has rhythm; I am cared for; I am loved. When you know you are facing a storm, it is worthwhile to

step back and ask, how can I care for myself? How can I ground myself, so that I can show compassion and be bold in bringing forth what God is asking of me?

Whether Jesus noticed from his mountain retreat the storm raging the waters below and rushed down, or if he had finished his time of retreat and had only come to join his friends again, his approach reflected something really different from the panic that had seized the boat. Though the terrified disciples thought they had seen a ghost-- maybe Jesus had suffered the same kind of ending as John-- Jesus gently and calmly tells them, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

What happens next gives us two models of how we might respond. Maybe they are not the only models, but I think they are good models. Some stay in the boat. Let me suggest that that is an okay choice to make. The disciples who stayed in the boat, maybe they were able to let it sink in that Jesus is here, and his command to not be afraid must mean that a steadying will happen. I wonder if there was some sort of expectation, a time of recalibrating the body's response to panic, as those disciples felt the firmness of the bottom of the boat, the confidence of Jesus' expression, the realization that they were no longer in this on their own, but had some kind of divine intervention. That kind of trust, if we can come to it on our faith journey, is a real blessing, even if we never leave our boats.

Leave it to Peter to have a different kind of response. Peter for some reason was always trying to prove himself to Jesus or test the boundaries of where he stopped and where Jesus started. And so, Peter laid out this condition: "Lord, *if it is you*, command me to come to you on the water." He just couldn't leave good enough alone, could he? He wanted to prove his faith, and yet his faith needed proof. We all know what happens: the moment Peter catches a gust of that strong wind, he sinks as quickly as Keyla will sink with today's first good pitch hurled at that dunking booth.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes of this moment, "What if Peter had not sunk? What if he had jumped out of the boat with perfect confidence, landed splat with both feet flat on the water and smiled across the waves at Jesus, gliding toward him without a moment's hesitation? What if the other disciples had followed suit, piling out of the boats after him...It would be a different story. It might even be a better story, but it would not be a story about us."

The story of us is that we are a people who are sealed in baptism. Our first mark of Christian sacrament is a reenactment of sinking and rising. No doubt Peter kept that sensation for the rest of his life, and it emboldened him-- just that little bit of faith that put him on the water made him able to do great things. While Jesus said to Jesus, "You of

little faith,” the truth is that just a little bit of faith is enough to get us through, and quite possibly even do something remarkable.

For those of you who are feeling battered in the midst of the storm, you may wonder, “So when is Jesus going to show up, walking on the waves towards me?!” The truth is, it may never be in the storm that you discover him. In our reading from 1 Kings today, we find that Elijah puts himself on the mountain so the Lord can pass by him. *Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake;<sup>12</sup> and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.*

And it was in the silence that had followed the rock-splitting wind, the earthquake, and the fire, *it was in the silence...* it was in the silence... that Elijah finally heard from God.

So my wish to you during this time is just a *little* bit of faith. Just enough to help you wait out the wind, the earthquake, the fire, the storm, and find the silence that will bring God to you. *Just enough* faith to help you cling to the side of the boat as you witness Jesus, assuring you of his presence and telling you not to be afraid. Maybe even *just enough* faith to make an imperfect leap, one that is full of doubt and questions, but still a leap, into the waters. Amen.