

Sermon

“Take Heart!”

August 25th, 2019 ~ First Presbyterian Church

11th Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Matthew 14:22-33

SCRIPTURES:

Matthew 14:22-33

²² Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³ And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴ but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵ And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶ But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. ²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” ²⁸ Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” ²⁹ He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” ³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” ³² When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³ And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.” [NRSV]

OPENING PRAYER: God of our present trouble and promised triumph—Open our eyes to see you in the midst of our struggles. Open our ears to hear your words of invitation and assurance. Open our minds to recall your wonderful works and miracles. And, open our hearts to seek strength in your Word; through Jesus Christ our Lord; and let all God’s people say ... Amen.

“Thought of the Day”

My wife, Dency, has had a habit throughout her career where she sends out a “thought of the day” message to her employees and co-workers, which is typically an inspirational quote taken from a variety of famous persons, either living or dead. From time to time, she includes me on her shared thoughts of the

day, and sometimes she sends out a real gem! Recently, she sent out this quote from my favorite artist, Vincent Van Gogh:

“The fishermen know that the sea is dangerous and the storm terrible, but they have never found those dangers sufficient reason for remaining ashore.”

Vincent Van Gogh

Now, as I said, Van Gogh is my favorite artist and he has been for most of my life, ever since taking an art appreciation course during my freshman year of college. But, it was during my seminary years that I became truly captivated, not just by the drawings and paintings he created, but also by whom Van Gogh was as a person. So as a serious fan of Van Gogh, this recent “thought of the day” touched me more deeply than most quotes Dency has sent out. Like many gifted and talented artists tend to do, Van Gogh's artwork touches us in places that few others can reach. And, I think that is true because Van Gogh's creativity and artwork were driven by something much deeper than his immediate surroundings.

Van Gogh was more than a manic and tormented painter, full of mystery and contradiction. He was driven by a spiritual quest on a faith journey that began in childhood—he was raised in a parsonage by a family of pastors, and nurtured in an atmosphere of daily prayer, worship, and Bible readings (like our reading today from Matthew's gospel). And, at different times during his 37 years of life, he served as a lay preacher, teacher, and missionary. Yet, public interest in Van Gogh too often focuses more on why he painted common people and simple landscapes, or why he cut off his ear. Beneath all of that, however, lies a faith that was molded by a combination of Japanese Zen Buddhism and Christian tradition, as if Vincent took the best of eastern philosophy and the best of his Dutch spiritual heritage, and expressed himself and his faith through both his paintings and his written words in letters to family and friends.

As Catholic priest, professor, and writer, Henri Nouwen, once noted, Van Gogh longed “for a God who is tangible and alive, who truly comforts and

consoles, and who truly cares for the poor and the suffering.”¹ You see, for Van Gogh, *that God* was real. That God was directly present. And, that God was visible both in nature and in people, scenes of which he painted again and again and again. Remember, he knew his Bible stories (stories like ours today about Jesus walking on water), and that very real, present, and visible God is exactly why he was once led to say:

“The fishermen know that the sea is dangerous and the storm terrible, but they have never found those dangers sufficient reason for remaining ashore.”

Matthew’s Gospel: Jesus Walks on Water

Which brings us to our gospel story today ... as we pick up at verse 22, Jesus has just finished feeding more than 5,000 people with only 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish. He then goes to pray on a mountain and he makes the disciples get into a boat and cross the Sea of Galilee without him. And, so the scene shifts from a deserted, wilderness place to the water—it shifts from God’s provision to God’s deliverance. Now, we must remember, some of the disciples were experienced fishermen from that same Galilee area. They would have known how quickly and terribly storms can arise on that body of water. And, yet:

“The fishermen know that the sea is dangerous and the storm terrible, but they have never found those dangers sufficient reason for remaining ashore.”

But, on this particular night, the disciples find themselves in a real predicament. They are in a boat out on the water, it’s dark, and strong winds begin flinging them from wave to wave. While probably not unfamiliar, their situation is indeed perilous. And, where is Jesus? Well, for hours Jesus has been off alone praying on a mountain, and then early in the morning he comes toward them, walking on the water. And, scripture tells us that when the disciples saw Jesus approaching them, they were terrified. You think? I mean, wouldn’t you be afraid? I know I would! Yet Jesus tells them, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid” (verse 27).

The Theme of Fear

And, there we have the central, recurring theme of this story—FEAR. The

¹ Edwards, Cliff (1989). *Van Gogh and God: A Creative Spiritual Quest*. Chicago: Loyola University Press. Foreword p.X.

story is littered with phrases of fear, like “terrified,” “cried out in fear,” “do not be afraid,” and “became frightened.” Fear is a powerful component to this story, just like fear is a powerful component of our lives. One type of fear present in this story is the fear of the unknown—a fear that all of us experience throughout our lives ... a fear that often comes during a variety of challenges we may face. This fear of the unknown was very real for the disciples as they felt terror at seeing Jesus walking toward them on the water—not because it’s Jesus, their master and friend, but because of his particular appearance before them. You see, they had never seen or known or understood Jesus this way before. But, there he stood, on the *surface* of the water, amidst a raging storm.

Another type of fear present in this story is the fear of sinking—a fear that our situation in life is more fragile than we want to admit ... a fear that everything we work hard to achieve and obtain can be lost or taken in a blink of an eye. This fear of sinking was very real for the disciples as they were far from land, and tossed helplessly to and fro as the waves crashed around them. They felt like the wind and the waves and the world was against them, often a true metaphor for our lives when it seems like the whole world is somehow against *us*.

A final type of fear present in this story is the fear of taking risks—a fear of stepping out of our comfort zones ... a fear of leaving places and feelings of security. This fear of taking risks was very real for Peter as he stepped out of the boat to walk toward Jesus. But, Peter suddenly realized he was vulnerable and exposed and distracted by his surroundings. And, Peter realized that he wasn’t Jesus. And, just like Peter, we aren’t Jesus either.

Jesus is Lord

Because Jesus alone is Lord, and that’s a job description we have no hope of ever fulfilling! Just as God identified himself to Moses long ago at the burning bush, Jesus uses the divine name, I AM, to announce his presence to them saying, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid” (verse 27). In other words, take heart, I AM is here! The Lord is here ... so do not be afraid!

Jesus *is* Lord—the same Lord who triumphed over water so many other times in scripture: 1) during the creation of the world, 2) through the covenant with

Noah, 3) in the act of deliverance in parting the Red Sea for Moses and the escaping Israelites, and 4) being with God’s people while crossing a swollen Jordan River into the Promised Land. Then, in today’s story, we have another very specific sign of God’s amazing and transcendent power over water and all that would threaten and thwart God’s purposes. Jesus is Lord—Lord over the deep, over the wind, over the waves, and over all the destructive forces that threaten to overwhelm our lives each and every day.

Jesus is Lord and Jesus is with us always—when we are afraid and when we are not. Jesus is with us when we fear the unknown, when we fear sinking and losing everything, and when we fear taking risks. And, Jesus is with us when we face our challenges, when we face our fragility and stand firm amidst the raging storms of life, and when we take a leap of faith and step out of our comfort zones, risking our own security.

Take Heart—Jesus is With Us

Presbyterian pastor, Clifton Kirkpatrick, beautifully writes, “Stepping out in faith is not a guarantee that we will not face troubled waters or be filled with fear, but it is always accompanied by the assurance that Jesus will not abandon us, that when we need it most, he will extend his arm to lift us up and get us back in the boat.”²

That’s exactly why we must take heart because we aren’t Jesus! Instead, we are Peter. We are the ones crying out at different times in our lives, “Lord, save me!” Because we, and every human being who ever lived and will live, are the ones who will always be anxious about the unknown; we will always worry about sinking and losing everything; and we will always be hesitant to take risks. But, we must realize also that we will always have Jesus at the ready—reaching out his hand and lifting us up when we need it most.

Now, among all the ways that this may be relatable to your own life right now, I strongly believe that this is the exact context we find ourselves in at this very moment as a congregation—not only because we continue to make our way

² Bostrom, Kathleen Long, Caldwell, Elizabeth F., and Reiss, Jana K., eds. (2013). *Daily Feast: Meditations from Feasting on the Word: Year A*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. p.412.

through this season of transition (this interim season), but also as we lean into the week ahead and what will be a new, and hopefully exciting, ministry for this family of faith. We may feel anxious about the unknown aspects of this Family Promise ministry ... and that's totally okay. Because we will be ministering to families—to mothers and their daughters and their sons—who know that sinking feeling all too well; who know more than they ever imagined what it feels like to lose everything. And, yet, God has called us to take the risk of trying to help these families get back on their feet. God has called us to take the risk of loving them because God loves them, and God has reached out God's hand to lift them up through churches like ours during this time in their lives.

And why? Because Jesus alone is Lord and we are not, which is why we have nothing to fear, and that's why there's no reason to be afraid. Van Gogh once said:

“The fishermen know that the sea is dangerous and the storm terrible, but they have never found those dangers sufficient reason for remaining ashore.”
So take heart my friends! No matter what happens in life, we are all destined to face dangers and terrible storms. But, God calls us to get in the boat anyway. And, with Jesus as our very real, very present, and very visible Lord, we have no sufficient reason to ever remain ashore.

God is with us! Amen!