

Scripture Reading: Matthew 14:22-32

Following the feeding of the 5,000 we read:

²² Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. ²³ After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone, ²⁴ and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

²⁵ Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. ²⁶ When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. “It’s a ghost,” they said, and cried out in fear.

²⁷ But Jesus immediately said to them: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

²⁸ “Lord, if it’s you,” Peter replied, “tell me to come to you on the water.”

²⁹ “Come,” he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus.

³⁰ But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!”

³¹ Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?”

³² And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. ³³ Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God!

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Even before my retirement, but more so lately, it seems, the world is a dark, stormy, scary place. The pandemic has torn through country after country and taken more than 5.5 million lives worldwide, made people sick, wreaked economic havoc, and changed life as we were used to it. It seems that there is a lot of anger everywhere. People are angry with each other and with the world and with everything. Education is in flux – at all levels of schooling – in class and then on-line causing much dismay and frustration. Mental health issues seem to be the order of the day, and one is overwhelmed and wonders what can be done to help those who are struggling. Long-term care homes are challenged beyond compare. Meanwhile the opioid crisis is increasing and thousands of Canadians have died. All sorts of other diseases and treatments are made to take a back seat to COVID because the hospitals are overwhelmed and many front-line workers are fatigued beyond understanding and quitting and ... well you know the story, some all to well.

If the pandemic and its consequences are not enough to make us want to stay in bed and not face each new day, there are always those dramatic weather stories that make us want to yell, “enough already! Stop the world, I want to get off!” Fires, floods, volcanos, drought, record high and low temperatures, tornados, hurricanes, rising sea levels, climate change and so forth are seemingly the discussion and order of the day. Then I have not said anything as yet about racism or residential schools and the abuse of the aboriginal population of this land, nor have I said anything of the lack of affordable housing and the many who are living on the street or domestic abuse or violence that seemed to have increased. And then there is Russian aggression against the Ukraine and the continued battle being fought by those seeking justice for the downed Ukrainian air-liner that killed so many people. The list can go on and on. When we look beyond us it is a dark, stormy, scary world. “How long, O Lord? How long?” “Come, Lord Jesus!”

But it is not just dark, stormy and scary out there, even in our own lives, storms can rage and we can become, oh, so tired. As we deal with illness, broken relationship, being laid off, having no income, on-line learning and juggling family time and work and being home and the pandemic, and being lonely and cut off from those we love, and so forth, and when we are facing death in our family, things can become dark and stormy and scary.

I know all of this sounds rather heavy and maybe we don't want to hear it, but for many the reality is that life, despite all of the good things, can nonetheless be dark and tiring as Pastor Amanda mentioned, last week, as she preached just

prior to stepping out for her sabbatical. It may be considered a downer to mention all these things and so much more, but it is important that we name the things that are happening. We ought not to ignore them. We ought not to complain about it either, but we ought to lament them, as many a psalmist lamented the situations they found themselves in.

But besides our lament and our questioning ‘how long, O Lord, how long?’ we need to ask the question, so how do we keep on going? What is it that gets us through the dark, stormy, scary world that we are facing? Where ought our attention to be? Last week Pastor Amanda went through a whole list of self-help things that we can do to get us through: Peleton, organizers, apps and such things that we can buy or download to distract us from the darkness all around. Or, as one radio station puts it, we can listen to “beautiful music for a crazy world”. Various counseling techniques will also help us cope. While such things may help us to cope or help to distract us and thereby do wonders for our mental health, the reality is that ultimately these sorts of things are only temporary and certainly they cannot provide us with the peace that passes all understanding, as the apostle Paul speaks of it.

So, if the Peleton, organizers, and various mindfulness apps or exercises, while perhaps helpful for the moment, really cannot provide the shalom – the restoration – the peace that we crave, where do we turn? Last Sunday we heard an invitation from Jesus to come and rest awhile. As Pastor Amanda worked that out for us, she pointed us beyond just literally resting, i.e., sitting on the couch or just sleeping or relaxing or listening to music. She pointed us beyond self-help approaches to Jesus. He is not another self-help program or item, but Jesus is the very one who offers the bread of life. Jesus is the one who sat people down on green grass (as Mark noted) and fed them. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who meets the needs of those before him, and he did so by giving his very life and overcoming the grave!

The passage we read from Matthew 14, this morning, also points us beyond the present reality to Christ, to the Good Shepherd. If you have your Bibles open to Matthew 14 you will note that the chapter has 3 stories in it. It begins with the story of the execution of John the Baptist, who was Jesus’ cousin and forerunner. After hearing such news (verse 15 tells us) “Jesus withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place.” No wonder! How many of us don’t need some time alone after hearing some terrible news, but the crowds were unforgiving and not understanding of Jesus’ need to be alone. They followed him on foot around the Sea of Galilee and came to him with their sick and all their other needs. Jesus had

compassion on them, Matthew tells us, and he healed their sick and then when it became late in the day, he also provided them with food – the second story. (Matthew 14:21) The people ate and were satisfied and there was more food than they knew what to do with. God's abundance was evident in this story. By this time Jesus must have been physically and emotionally exhausted and drained. He badly needed to spend some time with His Father in heaven. So, once the people had been fed and their sick had been healed Jesus sent them home and he also sent his disciples ahead of him in their boats. Then once he was all alone Jesus went to pray, to commune with His Father, to be encouraged in His spirit.

Meanwhile the disciples, without Jesus on board, began to row across the Sea of Galilee – the third story. From the northeastern shore of the Sea, the disciples began to row toward Gennesaret (says Matthew 14:34), which was located on the opposite shore. It was early in the evening, as it was starting to get dark. Some of the disciples like Peter, James and John were fishermen so they were not too worried about rowing at that time of night. They often fished at night on the Sea of Galilee. The boat they were in was not very large and not equipped with a motor or any other means of propulsion. It was small and perhaps the size of voyageur canoe. Oars were standard equipment on such boats, while perhaps the larger boats would be outfitted with a small sail of sorts. The boat was made of wood and did not rise very far out of the water. It was easy to step in and out of the boat and easy for water to wash over the side of the boat.

This particular night the boat was filled with the disciples, an uncommon load for such a boat. Usually, 2 or 3 fishermen would be found in the boat, but now it was being used as a ferry and so it was filled with people. To make matters worse the wind was strong this particular night. The further they were from the shore the worse the wind became and it was against them, in their face. It is hard enough to ride a bicycle into the wind, never mind to row a boat directly into the wind. Those who are sailors will tell you that it is important to keep the bow of the boat directly into the wind or else the waves will wash right over the side and swamp you. The fishermen on board the boat knew this too. But it was becoming increasingly difficult. "The boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it," Matthew records in verse 24. It was rather obvious that the disciples were in trouble. Even the sea-hardened fishermen must have been filled with fear. It was hard to make any headway, and the wind tended to make the boat go off course and get spun around so that the water would wash over the sides and soak everyone sitting there. They must have bailed like anything and rowed with all their might only to be frustrated in their

efforts, because they made no headway. Their worst fears were being realized. Unless the storm would stop, they might very all be drowned at sea, in the dark.

Picture it: the wind is howling, the waves don't stop and don't give any break at all, you are wet and tired, and it is pitch dark with all the light of the stars and moon gone because of the clouds. Jesus, the wonder worker, the master of the wind and waves, was not with them, like he was on another occasion, as recorded in Matthew 8. The disciples figured that this was the end of their lives.

For the men in the boat things were about to get worse, because "during the fourth watch of the night Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. 'It's a ghost,' they said, and cried out in fear." (Matthew 14:26) The night was broken into watch periods of 3 hours each when someone would be awake and on the lookout to make sure the boat would be safe. The fourth watch is from 3 to 6 AM. So, for anywhere from 6 - 10 hours the disciples had been fighting the storm. They probably had very little sleep, if any that night, and now they saw what appeared to be a man walking on the water, which was, of course, impossible. People do not walk on water.

One of the superstitions alive, among the fishermen of that day, was that there was some sort of monster or spirit of the water who could be seen from time to time in the storms on the sea. Seeing such a creature, such a ghost or specter would mean bad luck and it could mean that basically it has come for your soul. So, storms were to be avoided at all cost. Of course, the Biblical image of the sea indicated chaos and death – hence on the new earth we are told there will be no more sea – no more chaos or death. Now when the disciples saw Jesus, (although they did not know it was Jesus) walking on the water they were convinced that they were done for. All their worst fears and all the things that they had ever heard about the ghosts and monsters of the sea had come true, in their minds. Surely this was their final moment on earth. In a few moments the monster, the ghost, the apparition, the specter would plunge their little boat to the bottom of the sea and they would be destroyed forever. So, they were filled with terror.

Then look at what Jesus did! It is a remarkable thing! Jesus was not content to merely pray for his disciples up there in the mountains, he also came to them in their distress, in their trouble in the storm on the Sea. The fact that there was water there was really of no consequence to the Lord of all, the Lord of life. He merely walked on it as if it were a field or sidewalk. And he went right to His disciples as they sat helplessly in the boat being tossed about by the wind. There simply was

no way they could save themselves unless someone did something extraordinary. If the storm would not die down or if something miraculous did not happen, they were all to be lost at sea. And then Jesus came to the people caught up in panic and fear because of the storm all around them. His walking on the water only filled the disciples with greater fear until he called out to them "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." (Matthew 14:27) There are quite a number of places throughout the Bible that record these sorts of words on the part of the Lord. "Do not be afraid!" "It is I," that is to say "the very Lord, the great I AM who has called you and chosen you as his disciples, who has been with you and has given you so many proofs of his love and power, it is He who is here, so don't be afraid." "I have called you to preach the gospel to the far corners of the earth, and since that is the case why would I let you, all drown in this storm here at sea." "Do not be afraid! Take courage!"

This is an incredible scene. The wind is blasting all around and the waves are splashing into the boat about to swamp it and the disciples were shaken to their very core and then, in rather dramatic fashion, they are reminded of Jesus, the Lord of life, the Good Shepherd who sat people down on green grass, and leads them by quiet waters, the very One who restores their soul. How wonderful! This is the gospel, the good news!

What happened here in Matthew 14 tells us about Jesus and what it is that He had come to do. Coming out to the disciples in the middle of the storm in all their helplessness, and amidst their great fear, is exactly why Jesus came in the first place. While we were yet sinners, says the apostle Paul, Jesus came and died for us. While we are battered about in life by sin and by all the temptations that surround us and while we experience brokenness, and illness, and pandemics and wild weather, and rumors of war and frustration and so on and as we face our greatest fears, Jesus moved into our neighbourhood, the Word became flesh! Jesus comes to us, walking right through the storm, so to speak, and he says, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." "I am the Lord, who has given my life for you that you may live! Ultimately you cannot be hurt. There is nothing that can separate you from my love, no storm, no fear, nothing! Look to me! Trust in me!"

Peter was thrilled. Jesus' words brought an immediate calm to his heart and he asked if he could come to Jesus. He trusted the Lord without question and he did something then that probably very few, if any, of us would even consider doing. He asked Jesus if he could come to him on the water. Without any criticism or rebuke or warnings of any sort, Jesus gave Peter permission to come. So, in the middle of the storm Peter stepped over the side of the boat and walked

on the water to Jesus! As long as he looked to Jesus and trusted in Jesus, things went well. But when Peter "saw the wind, he was afraid and beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!" One writer suggests, "The Lord permits us to try our strength that we may discover our weakness." (Pulpit, Matthew 14, pg. 88) The Lord's response to Peter was to reach out his hand and pull him back up out of the water so that they could return to the boat together. Jesus said, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" (Matthew 14:31) Can you imagine? Jesus called Peter a man of little faith, even after what he had done. How many of us would have asked to come to Jesus on the water in the midst of the storm? We like to think of Peter as someone with great faith, someone to emulate, someone to honour, but Jesus knew better. "You of little faith." Peter had not fully taken to heart the comfort and courage he should have received from the presence, promises, power and love of Jesus. Peter turns out to be, oh, so human. Like the rest of us he was weak and needed the Lord Jesus. Without Jesus, Peter would have been lost at sea.

How wonderful the Gospel! In our helplessness as we are being tossed about in the storms of life; as we are confronting our greatest fears; as we hurt and are frustrated and wonder about our very existence, Jesus comes to us and says, "Look at me! Take courage! Don't be afraid." I AM the way the truth and the life." "I am the Alpha and Omega, the author and perfecter of your faith." The song writer prays, "Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies." Indeed, look to Jesus!

But there is something else which is marvelous to understand and that is that our future, our stepping out of the boat into the waves, does not depend on *our* own strength or even on the strength of *our* own faith but it is all dependent on *Jesus* and *His* strength and on the victory He has won. Had Jesus not come to the disciples and had Jesus not reached out his hand to Peter as the disciple was sinking, all would have been lost. "You of little faith." It is by grace through faith, with the emphasis on grace, that one has a future with the Lord even amidst the seeming chaos of our lives. That is something that most of us have a hard time understanding and really taking to heart. We figure we have to be strong and towering heroes of faith in order to be accepted into the Kingdom. We figure we have to do something to be called His son or daughter, but that is not so. Salvation is from Jesus, not from us. Salvation is dependent on the Saviour not on those being saved. That is certainly what Peter must have learned as Jesus grabbed his hand and pulled him up.

Then when Jesus had come to them and after he had rescued Peter, then "When they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in

the boat worshipped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." (Matthew 14:32-33) It is Jesus who brings shalom and peace amidst the storms of life. As the song writer put it, "Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace!" Indeed, look to him and you be able to say with the Psalmist: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want." "God is our refuge and strength an ever-present help in trouble – therefore we will not fear! Amen.

Prayer: Father in Heaven, Lord of creation, the storms are raging. We are very aware of them and they fill us with fear and anxiety and stress and we are oh, so tired. Shine through the gloom and point us to the skies. Help us to look to you. Thank you, Lord Jesus, for being obedient to the Father and for stepping into our messed-up world and for walking among us in this stormy dark scary world. Thank you for your victory over sin and death! Grant us your peace! Amen.