

August 09, 2020 Sermon
Matthew 14: 22-33

It was an unusually warm day in Ohio for April 11, 1965. It was Palm Sunday, and although I was only around eight years old, I remember the events of this day. It was a hot, *hot* day in church. There was *no* air conditioning, but it was an *exciting* day because we were handed palms and I KNOW we sang, "All Glory, Laud and Honor." Following worship, we went home, changed clothes, had Sunday dinner and then it was time for mom and dad to read the "Sunday paper" and take naps.

My sister and I had played outside that day because it was most likely one of the first warm days we'd had since the start of winter. Toward late afternoon, it began to get cloudy...really cloudy...and the wind was picking up. We were called inside, had supper and went into the living room and plopped ourselves down on the floor to watch The Wonderful World of Disney, but something wasn't quite right.

Dad had gone outside to feed the animals, but was outside *longer* than he normally was. We heard him come in, talking softly to mom in the kitchen, and it wasn't long before mom came in the room and opened the large, east facing front door of the house. We had to move the huge colonial sofa to get the door opened because we hadn't quite opened the house up for the summer, yet.

After moving the sofa, and opening the door, my sister and I were told to *sit* on that very sofa. As we got up from the floor, we noticed through the window that dad had turned the car around to face the end of the driveway. (he did this in order that we might outrun a tornado...thank God we never had to try that)

As we sat on the sofa with mom, she told us to pray. My mom never prayed out loud, but we knew when she told us to pray, something was up. These were the moments I dreaded most. These *tiny little acts*, with the clouds rolling in and the wind blowing, could mean only one thing...tornado warnings!

This was to be the start of the dreaded Palm Sunday tornadoes that killed 271 people, injured around 1500 and went through 6 states. All the tornadoes that night, were considered to be of the F4 variety with one being an F5. (I didn't even know the ratings went that high) I'm not sure what I prayed about as I sat, scared to death on the sofa that night, as the storms rolled through, but I'm sure, being an eight-year-old, one of the requests at the time must have been, "Please, God, make it stop!"

As it turned out, following that night, we were all fine. I don't remember if the rest of the family farm suffered damage or not, because when you're as young as I was, all you really care about is hoping nothing will happen to your family or your house. I was raised in the church. Mom told us to pray, so I guess our faith carried us through the night. It was nothing short of a *miracle* to me.

Speaking of miracles, today's gospel lesson takes us back to the scene, where the disciples fed over five thousand people. This was most *certainly* a miracle! People came in from *everywhere* to see Jesus. The disciples had only five loaves and two fish, so they thought they should send the crowds away for their evening meal, but Jesus tells them **THEY** should feed everyone. After Jesus blesses the loaves and the fish, the disciples feed the crowd.

Baskets of leftovers have been collected, the sun has/is about to set, and Jesus tells the disciples to get into the boat and head to the other side while he dismisses the crowds of people. After doing so, Jesus goes up the mountain by himself to pray. He *finally* gets that alone time he was seeking earlier in the day when he found himself in the midst of the crowds.

The boat, filled with disciples, had drifted far from the shore. It seems the wind had caused the waves to carry the boat a little further than Jesus expected. Early in the morning, Jesus decided he ought to get out there to the boat and be with the disciples, so he begins walking toward them on the water, but when the disciples saw him coming, they were terrified. They thought it was a ghost and they *cried* out in fear, but Jesus *spoke* to them saying, "*Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.*"

I have no idea what the *other* disciples were thinking after Jesus told them to not be afraid, but *Peter* hops up and says, “If it’s really *you*, Jesus, command me to *come* to you on the water.” Peter *could* have stayed in the boat and said something like, “Hey, if it’s really *you*, tell me how many people we fed today!” But Peter thinks a little more *outside* the box than most, so he asks Jesus to command him to come to him on the water. Jesus agrees and says, “Come.”

Hearing this, Peter got out of the boat and began to walk on the water, heading *straight* to Jesus, but *then* Peter’s thoughts were captured by the gusty wind and he became *frightened*, began to *sink* and cried out, “*Lord, save me!*” (I picture this as the equivalent to my mom saying, “pray!”) Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught Peter, saying compassionately, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” Once in the boat, the wind died down and the rest of the disciples *worshiped* Jesus saying, “*Truly* you are the Son of God.”

As I said earlier, Jesus had just performed a miracle by creating enough food for over five thousand people. What *was* it about this walk on the water that caused them to be *frightened*? Was it just *foggy* enough they couldn’t make him *out*? Did they not *expect* this “trick” of walking on the water to be something Jesus would do? Had they *thought*, once they were on the boat, *drifting* out to sea, that this *might* be the last they would see of Jesus? How could this *worker* of miracles *still* not be on their mind and *recognizable* as he is walking out to their boat?

How is it that mom *knew* to tell us to pray as we *huddled* together on the sofa in front of the open east door? What does it *take* for people to trust God in moments when we are *most* afraid?

I have often heard people say, in moments of desperation, “Well, I *guess* all that’s *left* to do is *pray*.” In reality, shouldn’t we be *STARTING* with prayer? Why would we *wait* until that’s *all* that’s left to do? *Prayer* should be the *first* thing that comes to mind, not something used as a *last* resort.

Fear of the wind and waves, kept Peter from looking to Jesus. As Peter started to sink, though, he *cried* out in prayer, “*Lord, save me!*” Perhaps *this* is the prayer we should be using when we’re dealing with the storms of life. Jesus is the *exact* *opposite* of fear.

We are *all* going through varying storms right now. *Collectively*, we are dealing with the *virus*, but we are *not* all dealing with our *fears* collectively, or the same way. Storms *rage* about masks and distancing and theories as to why we are *all* in this mess, and we're getting in the way of letting God *help* us. When we *fuss* and *argue* and *stew* over even the most *insignificant* of things, *that* is when Jesus is in a fog and we don't recognize him. We *need* to get out of the boat and head toward him. Let's make that the *first* thing we do.

So maybe we *stumble* on our way, it's *okay*. God in Christ is here to reach *out* to us, to *help* us to continue to make our way through our storms, through ***any*** storms that come our way. God in Christ is *here* to *help* us get *back* into the boat, to *calm* the wind and help us get back to whatever our *normal* is supposed to be.

The storms of life will continue to rage on, but Jesus says to us, "*Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.*" He speaks to us the same way he spoke through my mom during the *dreadful* Palm Sunday tornadoes when she said, "Sit down here and pray."

Doubts and fear will occasionally show up, as we get lost in all the things life *throws* at us. God in Christ is *with* us, *walking* among us on the waves of life, through our friends, our family and our neighbors, and he's reaching *out* through them, to help keep *us afloat*. My prayer for *all* during these trying times is to keep your eyes on Jesus. He's reaching out to *help* you with hands full of grace and mercy. Amen.