

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 9, 2020
Matthew 14: 22-33 and 1 Kings 19: 9-18
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Where Faith is Formed

I am guessing you've had an experience like this. One particular day is filled with generally positive and productive experiences. You should of course end that day feeling quite good about yourself. But in the midst of all those affirming parts of your day there occurred one very negative moment. It might have been an argument with someone from work or home. It might have been a negative encounter with a complete stranger. If that negative experience was emotionally charged, then I am going to guess that at the end of the day it was a spoiler for all the good that had come your way.

We are programmed from our earliest beginnings to be extra alert for that which threatens us. Any challenge to our well being sticks, and needs to be processed for what we might learn. In other words, the negative and painful don't go away by themselves, especially if we just try to ignore them. Which is why a significant loss in your life requires a period of grieving. Any public failure, at work or with family, must be a place for learning. On that level the saying is actually true, "Whatever doesn't kill me makes me stronger".

With that I want to remind you of the context for today's Gospel lesson, especially if you have been tracking the homilies at Trinity these past few weeks. You already know that I switched two weeks of the lectionary in order to have specific lessons for last Sunday's confirmation service. So we have not read Matthew in order. So let me reset the scene.

First, Jesus receives the troubling news of the violent and gruesome death of John the Baptist, his cousin and the one who heralded his mission.

On hearing that Jesus departed by boat to get away from the crowd and find a quiet place in which he might, presumably, grieve for John.

The crowd however tracked his progress from the land, and when he came ashore they were waiting for him, with many who were sick and ailing. Matthew said "Jesus had compassion on them" and spent the rest of that day ministering to all who were sick. No quiet, alone time for him.

At the end of the day the disciples urged him to send the crowd away so that they could return to the towns to buy something to eat while it was still daylight. Jesus instead instructed the disciples to give them something to eat, even though they had only a small snack among themselves.

The crowd at the feeding miracle which followed was 5000 men, plus the women and children. Certainly a high point for all involved in the ministry of Jesus.

When supper was over Jesus sent his disciples away, dismissed the crowds himself, and finally found himself alone and able to pray, to grieve, and to process his own feelings.

That brings us to today's text. The disciples were caught in a quick and dangerous storm, the kind that can blow up without warning on Lake Erie. They fought against the pounding waves and the wind, which the NRSV says "was against them", but a literal translation could be the wind "was hostile to them like an enemy", or perhaps "was terrorizing them". It was a dicey situation.

Jesus, having prayed, comes to them walking on the water. This - which is far more difficult to understand than a violent storm — completely terrorizes the disciples. As they are crying out, presumably hysterically, Jesus says, again to offer a more literal translation of the Greek, "be brave, I AM, do not fear". The important part of that for you to hear today is, "I AM".

That is a reminder to anyone familiar with the Hebrew Bible of that name God revealed to Moses at the burning bush, the name which became for the children of Abraham the most sacred name of God, the name they so revered that they would not even voice it aloud lest they somehow dishonor it. The name, translated to English as "I AM".

It's one thing to have a negative encounter in an otherwise good day. It's even one thing to have an essentially bad day all around. We have been having a bad year, almost anyway you measure it.

The Novel Coronavirus is so wildly present in our society that we, no bragging rights here, lead the world in infections and deaths. The economy, in spite of the trillions of dollars pumped into it directly via the stimulus packages of the spring, or the trillions more deployed by the Federal Reserve Board, remains greatly at risk. Millions are still out of work. The stoppage of federal support for the unemployed and the expiration of the ban on evictions is a troubling double whammy that some are warning may tip us into the economic trough of a depression. As some iconic corporations in our country file for Chapter 11 protection under the bankruptcy laws many, many more small businesses are beginning to close their doors.

It's been a bad year.

Who could blame anyone for not feeling terrified? How many have prayed like Peter, "Lord, save me."?

The disciples seemed to have forgotten all that had happened the day before. The multitude of healings, topped off by the miracle of the meal for thousands from a small amount of bread and fish. Are human memories of God's power so short lived as all that?

Peter too knew all that had happened the day before, and he had the added invitation to join Jesus for a stroll on the stormy seas. He even walked some, but then he too became just too distracted by the immediacy of danger he forgot who he was with.

Following Peter's rescue from the stormy deep, as Jesus climbed into the boat the text says "the wind ceased, and those in the boat worshiped him, saying "Truly you are the Son of God."

The danger they faced, the terror of their predicament was necessary for their insight when Jesus declared, "Be brave, I AM, do not fear."

So often we want to see God on the good side of our lives and experiences. We want to see God in a rainbow, not in the danger of gale force winds. We want to see God in the joyful birth of a new child, not in the devastating diagnosis of a life threatening illness. We want to see God

in the dark black ink on a year end balance sheet, not in the disruption of an economic meltdown.

Yet it is in those times of danger and need that faith is formed. It is in those moments when God seems most absent that trust becomes the light that enables us to perceive him.

However, disasters themselves are not a sign of God's activity. In our first lesson today Elijah also was coming off a series of wins. He had defeated the prophets of Baal in a contest. He had successfully announced the end of a drought. But when you thought he might be at his faithful best he heard that an angry Queen Jezebel had sent assassins to end his life. He fled to a lonely cave on a far away mountain and there encountered God. You heard the text. First there came a dangerous and destructive wind. But God was not in that powerful display. Then came a mountain toppling earthquake. But God was not in that shaking. Third a great fire ran up the side of the mountain. But God was not in the flames. Finally there was silence. The rather obscure Hebrew is sometimes translated as, "the sound of sheer silence". In that which displayed the least power, and was not awe inspiring in any way, that is where Elijah encountered God. Elijah, like Peter and the disciples, like you and me, has only one path to an encounter with God. That is the path of trust and faith.

If in powerful storms or destructive natural disasters, if in the abundance of good things like miracle banquets or healed bodies we expect to find God, we may well be disappointed. For God comes to us when and where we least expect an encounter.

God comes to us with the same word spoken to the disciples in that tossing boat. "Have courage! I AM, God is, with you! Don't be afraid!"

Let our faith find strength in that promise, as as faith moves us to worship and to a deep reverence for God, who loves us so very much. Then let us get busy and be lights in the midst of our present darkness. God is with you, don't be afraid!