

Sunday Sermon by William Powel

August 13, 2023

Thank you to Jeanne for the invitation to preach today.

I am happy to report that Jessie Dodson is firmly grasping the baton in the handoff as Canon to the Ordinary in the Diocese of Ohio—there are two of us for the next couple of weeks. She and I overlap this month before I step aside on September 1. I'll continue to serve as a volunteer Chancellor, which I did for several years before joining the staff.

This the first of two Gospel readings about Jesus and a boat in stormy weather. The other one has Jesus on the boat with the disciples and he's asleep and then wakes up and calms the waters. This is the other one: Jesus is NOT on the boat with the disciples. Why? Because he has just fed the 5,000 with five loaves and two fishes. Our reading today refers to it briefly— "Jesus dismissed the crowds" and went up to pray. He was probably protecting the disciples from the many who may have wanted more miracles. So he "made" the disciples get on a boat and go "on ahead" to the other side.

While Jesus is praying, a storm comes up on the Sea of Galilee, and the disciples are in the boat "battered by the waves," "far from the land," and "the wind was against them." A trifecta of maritime misery—no wonder the disciples are afraid.

My newest son-in-law grew up in Erie, Pennsylvania and Sandra and I had the pleasure last week of spending time in the place where Brandon grew in a family of sailors. I asked his uncle — who's sailed throughout the Great Lakes -- what's it like to be on Lake Erie in rough weather. He said that it's very treacherous because of the relatively shallow water of Lake Erie that creates a higher frequency of waves. When a storm kicks up, the distance between the wave crests is shorter and creates steep troughs—unlike rolling ocean swells, or even the wave action on the deeper Great Lakes. He described a particularly difficult night sail from Buffalo to Erie against the wind during a storm. Lake Erie is 100 times larger than the Sea of Galilee, but has about the same average depth as Lake Erie, so I can imagine what that might be like, and some of you may have had the same experience.

The point is that the disciples were in a tight spot—they were scared and full of doubt. Peter, Andrew, James, and John were all experience fishermen, however, and they would probably not have been out on the water when a storm was brewing—especially at night. So no wonder that they thought they saw a ghost when Jesus comes towards them on the water. But when the ghost speaks, the disciples realize that it's Jesus and he tells them: "take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." So what is Peter's reaction? He says "Lord, IF it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Notice the "IF"— Peter seems to be asking for Jesus' credentials. He's still afraid. As we approach the Scripture today, I wonder how we might feel in a similar situation and how might this story speak to us, especially if we find ourselves in a period of chaos and instability.

Peter is indeed the focus of this story—just as he was last week with the Transfiguration. He often seems to be the one who says or does the most human things, as he did on the mountaintop when he said the first thing we need to do is to build three tents. Or here, when he says to Jesus: “Command me to walk across the water to you.” Why does he respond that way?

Consider these observations about Peter from two Luther Seminary professors. Rolf Jacobson suggests that, instead of leaving the boat, why wouldn’t Peter just have asked Jesus to perform another miracle? Like calm the storm? Remember--they had all just seen him with 5,000 dinner guests a few hours earlier. Instead, Peter says “Command me to walk across the water to you.” Having been sent on the boat by Jesus, and perhaps feeling abandoned by Him, Peter’s first desire; his first response to the crisis, says Jacobson, is to want to be close to Jesus.

Professor Karoline Lewis says that the absence of Jesus from the boat causes the disciples to be terrified because they may be asking: “Is Jesus going to leave them?” We can imagine ourselves on a boat during an actual storm, or being buffeted by another kind of uncertainty from job insecurity or a health challenge. We may be fearful that Jesus is going to abandon us in our time of distress.

So Peter does step off the boat towards Jesus, starts to sink, and cries out “Lord save me!,” and Jesus immediately catches him and calms the waters. “You of little faith,” Jesus says, “why did you doubt?” All the disciples worship Jesus at that point, saying: “Truly, you are the Son of God.” Peter and the others learn that Jesus didn’t abandon them.

Bishop Jake Owensby of the Diocese of Western Louisiana, observes that this experience teaches Peter “that Jesus is with him in the storm” and is also with us “in the midst of things--even our worst things.” We are not alone in those times.

Let’s turn to the Elijah, who finds himself in a dire situation on dry land. He is very much alone and uncertain about the future because he has just defeated many false prophets who were loyal to Queen Jezebel, and he is on the run, fearing for his life. Queen Jezebel wants to take her revenge on him.

He is by himself, in distress, and is told by the Lord to stand on the mountain “for the Lord is about to pass by.” There follows a great wind, an earthquake, and fire, but the Lord is not there in any of these. It’s only in the “sound of sheer silence” that causes Elijah to cover his face—he is overwhelmed by the presence of God....”

For those of us at a certain age, it's hard not to hear the phrase “sound of sheer silence” without thinking of Simon and Garfunkel, their iconic song, and the initial lyric: “Hello, darkness, my old friend, I’ve come to talk with you again...” But here, Elijah is in listening mode.

I found it helpful to learn that there are several other less distracting translations to that phrase. In several versions, the scripture reads: “a still small voice” (King James and Revised Standard

Versions). Others use the phrase “a sound of a low whisper,” a “gentle whisper,” “a soft breath,” or even “a gentle blowing.”

These other translations help me understand that God is not only in the powerful forces of nature, but also is in the gentle presence of a still small voice or a gentle blowing. Elijah eventually received his instructions from God, but he needed to wait for the wind, earthquake, and fire to pass.

The common thread running through these translations is the presence of God that we can discern when we pray or when we are still. My predecessor as Canon to the Ordinary, the Rev. Alan James, once preached a children’s sermon – which obviously resonated with this adult -- when he said that praying is like using a walkie-talkie. You press the button to talk, but, you have to release the button to hear God’s response. We don’t always get an immediate response when we release the button, but it’s important to listen in order to hear the still small voice.

Dire situations will come again to us in each of our lives. Perhaps you find yourself in one this very day. Our Scripture speaks to these moments.

Wherever we may find ourselves in need, we can realize and take comfort that God is always with us; we are never alone -- whether in the storm or in the still small silence. Amen.