

### **“That Sinking Feeling” – Mat 14:22-33 – Aug 7, 2011**

God has an amazing sense of humour. On Tuesday as I looked at the lectionary texts for today, and reviewed what I had preached three years ago, I broke out laughing. You see, three years ago I opened my sermon with the claim that, “If I get a chance to preach on this text again I think I would change the title to ‘That Sinking Feeling’.” What caused me to laugh out loud was the fact that at 8:57 that very morning I received a phone call: “Hi, this is Sewell’s Marina calling – your boat is taking on water. Can you please come down right away and do something about it?” Needless to say, Elizabeth and I hooked up the boat trailer, jumped in the truck, and sped over to Horseshoe Bay. The marina people had pumped a large amount of water out of the boat, and we got it to the launch ramp and onto the trailer and safely into the back yard. But you know I could relate to the sermon title, “That Sinking Feeling!” That’s not just a different and perhaps catchier title, but I think it also highlights that the episode in Matthew’s gospel is more about the impact of events on people, and their reactions to those events, rather than the events themselves.

This incident of the storm, and Jesus walking on the water, is well known. And because it is so well known, it is hardly known at all. I think we all have some idea of how the story goes, and perhaps a bit more accurately than the common popular misconceptions that are out there, but how many of you remember where in Jesus’ ministry this event occurs? Luke does not include the episode, but Matthew, Mark, and John all locate it immediately following the feeding of the multitudes. Now, for bonus points, what happened on the other side? Good – yes, Jesus and the disciples were swarmed by people again. This incident occurs in a hiatus between crowds of people on one shore, and crowds of people on the other shore. It is a story about Jesus and his disciples alone, and some commentators believe it is thus aimed at the church rather than the general populace.

In any event, the disciples were certainly feeling the impact - it was a time of great terror for them. You might think that this fear is uncharacteristic of disciples who were fishermen, but I would argue otherwise. Very often people who have an intimate knowledge of the water, especially oceans, seas, and large lakes, also have a deep and abiding sense of the inherent danger of such waters. Only people familiar with the water truly understand just how quickly the situation can change from lovely rippling waters to raging seas that can literally swallow boats and people alike in the blink of an eye. Maritimers understand that fear, and each year sing the hymn we just sang on the Battle of the Atlantic Sunday

The disciples were terrified because of the sudden storm, of that there is little doubt. And to compound their deep fear out of the darkness comes a figure like a ghost, walking across the turbulent water as if it were smooth pavement. In a moment that rings with echoes of the resurrection appearances of Jesus, the disciples in their fear and terror do not even recognize him. Their panic is complete; their sense of being abandoned to and in peril of all the evil and tortured creatures lurking in the dark waters is total.

Sometimes life is a bit like that for all of us, isn’t it? I think people are divided into two categories – those who have experienced dark and stormy and frightening times, and those who will. I suppose it is possible that there are some who sail serenely through life without any stormy periods, but I can’t recall ever having met anybody like that. For most of us if not all of us there have been dark and stormy times, times when in our own fear and terror we haven’t been able to see Jesus walking serenely with us, keeping us safe from ultimate harm.

Sadly, many people, devout Christians all, believe that simply because they believe, that life will be smooth sailing. That is a popular and popularist view of Christianity – there’s even a

name for it, “commodity Christianity” – a position in which people believe that in return for our faith God will shower upon us blessings of health, wealth, and happiness; that “true and pure” belief will result in a good job, a wonderful spouse, 2.6 darling children, a large house in the burb’s, a car, RV, yes even a boat, and other trinkets galore.

It’s no wonder there’s a crisis of faith for people who hold those beliefs when disease strikes, the children do drugs, the RV and boat are repossessed, and the marriage breaks up. Real life brings dark and stormy nights when all seems lost. Real life brings moments when in our grief, in our terror we also cannot recognize Jesus standing right there in front of us. Real life is full of times of troubled waters, and scripture recounts many, many of those, including this momentous time for the disciples.

But scripture also brings us reassurances that we can weather these storms, and nowhere is this clearer than in this episode. Of course there’s the obvious and miraculous instant calming of the storm at Jesus’ command. In this version of the incident Jesus didn’t even have to voice the command – the raging storm and waters calmed – but not until Jesus and Peter got into the boat. And then there’s that strange business with Peter. Matthew is the only one who reports this odd interchange between Jesus and Peter at the height of the drama. I describe it as ‘odd’ not because of the miraculous nature of what took place, with Peter attempting to emulate Jesus’ walking on water, but instead because of Peter’s challenge to Jesus. Recall that Peter challenged Jesus with the charge, “Lord, if it is you command me to come to you on the water.” Jesus responds to that challenge by doing so, and Peter does so, except that Peter begins to sink (our former student, Wendy Adams, noted on Facebook that “of course Peter sank ... he was a ROCK!”) and Jesus rescues him.

We all too quickly think of Peter as the one that failed here, but what about the other 11 who sat glued to their seats in the boat? Peter at least tried ... and was not successful this time. How many of us realize however that most major successes in life come only after a number of failed attempts. You may be familiar with the spray lubricant in a blue and yellow can called “WD-40” ... it’s useful not only as a lubricant but as a rust remover, corrosion cleaner ... I even knew one old parishioner who put it on her knees and sword it helped. It was only recently that I discovered the way the product was named ... the researchers originally started to create a water dispersant ... that’s the WD part. But it was not until the 40<sup>th</sup> attempt that they found a combination that did the trick! Edison is reputed to have made over 20,000 tests before he created a light bulb that became a world standard. The message is clear – we only really fail when we don’t even try, when we sit paralyzed in the boat. But it is also vitally important to notice that the 11 who sat still in the boat were also saved from the storm by Jesus.

Peter’s challenge to Jesus was answered ... but not in the way that Peter expected, I think. I suspect Peter anticipated that if it really was Jesus then he (Peter) could walk over to join him, and arm-in-arm they would stroll back to the boat or to the far shore together. But that’s not how it turned out, is it? If this scripture incident is meant, as some believe, as a message to the church or to the faithful, then perhaps there’s the crux of the message: that we can challenge Jesus to save us from the storms and perils of life, and he will, but not necessarily in the ways that we either expect or demand. I suspect even God might lose count of the ways that people find in prayer to demand this, ask that, expect the other, and tell God how to do it to boot! The church has a sad and ignoble history of assuming that it is the equal of Jesus, and needs to hear from this story that like Peter we cannot tell God or Jesus or the Holy Spirit exactly how to do what we want them to do. Peter and the others were indeed saved, but not necessarily in the way they thought it might happen.

If we can hear the message that Jesus can and will save us from the storms of life, we might also be able to hear or at least understand the corollary that there will be storms in life. Unlike those who prey upon the fears of people I believe we can also hear that these storms do not signal the end of all things, do not portend that God is somehow tired of us or bored and just waiting to wrap it all up. Storms, times of troubled waters, are a normal part of life ... what is important is that we will – like Peter, and indeed even like the other disciples – be kept safe through our faith in Jesus ... it just may not happen the way we expect.

There is indeed a sense of the miraculous in this incident in the storm in Galilee ... but it is the miracle that Jesus will help us through times of trouble in spite of ourselves that is far and away more important than the mere miracle of controlling the elements of creation. When we look back at the times of troubled waters in our lives, I'm sure that we can see not only how Jesus was indeed present with us through those times, but also how he reached out and kept us from sinking as well. I suspect we might also be able to remember how the solutions turned out somewhat different from what we had hoped for, asked for, expected ... but also how the solutions turned out to be better in the long run. In that remembering, I hope that we might also recall how Jesus affirmed his presence with us, saying "it is I; do not be afraid"; how we also challenged "Lord, if it is you"; and finally how we are now able, also like the disciples, to affirm in our faith, "truly, you are the Son of God."