

Travels with Jesus Over Troubled Waters
Romans 10:5-15
Matthew 14:22-33
August 10, 2014
Fort Hill Presbyterian Church
Clemson, SC

I imagine some of you enjoy being on the lake, maybe even on Sunday morning. Several years ago our family stayed in a little fishing cabin on Seneca Lake in New York state. One afternoon we signed up for a schooner outing on the Malabar X. It was a glorious afternoon and as soon as we were away from the dock and starting to tack into the wind we saw it. There on the horizon we saw a cloud looming fiercely and getting darker and closer by the second. The captain encouraged folks to move below deck if they wanted to stay dry, but we had our ponchos so we stayed above board. It was both exciting and scary. We thought the captain was going to turn back, but he chose to steer us right into the storm, thinking that we were going into it and that the unrelenting rain would pass us by. We tasted the rain drops growing bigger until we were cold to the bone, we heard the thunder with our eyes closed, and we hung onto whatever we could to keep from falling off the boat into the wind while the waves crashed against the sideboard.

I think our adventure was exhilarating at the moment, but in hindsight I am thankful the lightening did not strike us and that the wind did not tip us over as we thought might happen.

With that singular experience I cannot imagine the fear that the disciples must have faced out on the lake that night. It may have been as forceful as last night's storm here. For the first time in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus commanded the disciples to get into the boat and go on ahead without him. They were alone, or so they thought. Then the storm came.

Meanwhile Jesus is sending the crowds away and climbing up to the mountain to pray. Finally, he too is alone. Earlier Jesus had been met with rejection in his own hometown of Nazareth and then was full of sorrow at the news of his cousin John being beheaded by Herod. When Jesus found out about John, the Lord got into a boat to go to a deserted place, but the crowds followed him on foot. Jesus needed some sabbath time and after feeding the crowds with two fishes and five loaves of bread, he was finally getting away to pray. But first he had to send his disciples out on their own in a little boat as the evening approached.

The Sea of Galilee is small compared to the lakes around here. Perhaps the best one to compare it to would be Lake Keowee. Keowee is 26 miles long and 3 miles wide with an average depth of 54 feet. The Sea of Galilee or Lake Tiberias as it is sometimes

called in Scripture is a natural lake that is 13 miles long and 8 miles wide with a depth of 141 feet. It is considered a freshwater lake fed by the River Jordan and other small streams, but also supplied by salt water springs at the bottom. The area is full of igneous rock and basalt from ancient volcanos and today it is still subject to earthquakes and unexpectedly strong winds.

The boat the disciples were in was probably a small 6-oar fishing boat that could be rowed and or sailed. The 12 disciples would have been packed into it like sardines. Imagine the scene now and add to it the fact that it is around 3 or 4 in the morning when Jesus was walking out on the water. He planned to pass them by, but they were full of fear. Here they were packed into a little boat for hours and getting almost no where when this apparition comes by. The Greek tells us they squawked like ravens in fear. So Jesus gives them encouragement and identifies himself with the words, "I AM." Here is the savior of all creation speaking, "Do not be afraid." But that is not enough for Peter who in his bold and bodacious nature speaks like the *devil testing Jesus*, "If you are the Lord, command me to come to you on the water." I think they might have been shouting to try to be heard over the storm. Jesus responds with "Come." And Peter does.

Now I don't know about you, but the last thing I want to do when a storm is raging and I am at sea is to step out of the boat, even if it is Jesus commanding me. For you see, what Jesus does then with this invitation is *test Peter's faith*. And Jesus knows Peter has a little faith and will need a helping hand. Just like the waters of baptism symbolize dying and rising with Christ, the mercy of the Lord pulling his disciple up and out of the deep is Peter's salvation. Together they enter the boat.

Some scholars debate whether this story belongs among the miracle stories or if it is more like a post-resurrection story where the disciples recognize Jesus as the Son of God. Maybe the miracle is that Peter and the disciples finally realized who was in their midst—I AM—Emmanuel, God with us.

Today we have the same lack of awareness and misplaced confidence as the disciples did in facing the storms that challenge the church. Like the little boat on the troubled waters, the church is battered about by conflicts. We find ourselves in the midst of anxious waters—differing viewpoints on issues of relationships regarding sexuality and marriage, on cultural and political hot topics revolving around the Middle East and gun control and a myriad of other issues. So what does this miracle teach us about being the church? That Jesus trusts the disciples, including us, to be the church and do his work, to go out into the anxious waters and lift others up, to enter the storms of life—the broken places and people, the bad news of terminal diagnoses, the debilitating physical limitations, the gripping fear of forgetfulness, the heart-breaking news of death and the paralyzing hopelessness of war and the church is to acknowledge that God is with us. Go out into the storms, step out of the boat when Jesus calls you to come. And invite others into the boat for the revelatory recognition that worship in its most profound confession proclaims to Jesus, "Truly you are the Son of God." The One who

commands us to go into the storms will bring us out of them when our baptism and our profession of faith is complete.

Jesus was about making disciples in this story and here in the our midst today. It is risky business to follow Jesus' commands to get into the boat and out of the boat, but regardless of where we are called to go or come, we are not alone. God is with us all the way. Jesus was teaching his disciples, those closest to him, to go deeper with him, and so too he continues to work in refining his leaders in the church today. Peter wanted proof that Jesus was the Lord so he left the boat in search of that proof. When he failed to find such proof he climbed back into the boat and found it in community as the disciples professed their faith together in the Son of God. We need one another in the church to continually profess our faith together. Those words in the Apostles Creed are dangerous words if we really believe them. **I believe in Jesus Christ our Lord...I believe in the holy catholic church, the communion of the saints...**We believe in being the body of Christ together—a corporate witness to the world that Jesus is the Son of God.

Jesus does not belittle Peter, but acknowledges that his faith is half-hearted or vacillating. This is a comment that Jesus makes about the disciples many times, almost as a tender reminder that faith comes from God, so stay focused on me. Jesus knows Peter will deny him and yet Jesus also knows that only a little while later he will name Peter the rock on which he will build his church. Peter is a leader who is willing to take risks in the service of the Good News. Jesus trusts Peter to set sail and let the Spirit lead instead of row out of self-indulgence. This trust and Peter's obedience to the Spirit will be necessary for the storms that happen next.

For you see following this miracle, changes begin to take place with interpretation of the Law. Jesus and his disciples will be accused of not following the tradition and so the storms continue.

I cannot help but think of the storms the church is facing in other parts of the world right now. Where Christians are still being beheaded for their faithfulness to Jesus Christ. The ***"ISIS persecution of Iraqi Christians has become genocide"***¹ is just one headline among the many gruesome realities.

Wilson Jaso, president of the UK Assyrian Society, was deeply pessimistic about the international community's slow response to the persecution.

"If we're not protected soon, there'll be none of us left in the country – which is our country – and no churches," he said.

¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/08/isis-persecution-iraqi-christians-genocide-asylum> accessed August 9, 2014.

Chaldean-American business man Mark Arabo said, “Christian holocaust is in our midst. This should never be happening in 2014.

Just last week, the ISIS bombed a church that was 1,800 years old, and have bombed 6 churches so far.

France is leading the way on offering asylum, but more help is needed.

“This living nightmare is not going away,” he said, “but it is only getting worse.”

“The world cannot turn a blind eye.”²

Do you hear the voice of the one calling? “Come.” That’s what Jesus is saying to you and to me.

Retired Duke Chaplain and Methodist Bishop Will Willimon “wonders if too many of us are merely splashing about in the safe shallows and therefore have too few opportunities to test and deepen our faith....If you want to be close to Jesus, you have to venture forth out on the sea, you have to prove Jesus’ promises through trusting his promises, through risk and venture.”³

In our own efforts to move away from or past the storm, we row and row and row, yet find ourselves deeper in the darkness. We must remember that the Son of God is with us, just as he promised his disciples then, so also God is present in the storms of life now. In so many communities around the world the persecution of Christians is not going away. In fact, it is increasing daily. Our text today gives us the most foundational and radical act we can practice as community in the face of such brutal uncertainty. **We can pray together.**

Prayer is what Jesus knew was needed when his cousin was murdered. Prayer is the most powerful thing we can do because it puts us in communion with God and the supreme power of the Holy Spirit. This is hard work because prayer goes against our human nature to maintain our control of our lives and instead prayer leads us to give over our worries to God. We like being our own lords. What we are reluctant to do is to believe that God is sovereign and will receive our cares from us. This relinquishing on our part takes courage—it is an action of the heart to have faith in God. Thus, like Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, only Christ can ascend to heaven and descend into hell for he is sovereign over all. The assurance we have is this “The word is near you,

² <http://www.persecution.org/2014/08/09/chaldean-christian-leader-isis-systematically-beheading-children-in-iraq/> accessed August 9, 2014.

³ Willimon, Will. “How Will You Know If It’s Jesus?” August 7, 2005. From Day1, http://day1.org/950-how_you_will_know_if_its_jesus accessed August 9, 2014.

on your lips and in your heart” because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead you will be saved.

Every memorial service, every graveside, every funeral is a witness to the resurrection. Jesus did not let Peter drown. Jesus, the Son of God will not let you or me drown. Jesus reaches out and keeps his promises.

And we know Peter’s faith grew because he got back in the boat again and again and again to travel to other places and share the Good News. How will people believe unless they hear? How will people hear unless they proclaim? How will they proclaim unless they are sent? Check out their feet, because according to Paul they are beautiful.

Friends, the miracle of proclamation can only stem from the heart, a heart of prayer. Let’s start there. Let us pray together.

“Dear Lord, be good to us. The sea is so wide and our boat is so small.”⁴ Truly you are the Son of God. Amen.

⁴ [http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What is the Breton Fisherman's prayer](http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What_is_the_Breton_Fisherman's_prayer) accessed August 9, 2014.