

Year A, Pentecost 8, Proper 13

August 7th, 2011

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Matthew 14:22-33

The Raging Storm of Our Own Making

“Immediately he makes the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismisses the crowds.” According to Matthew, Jesus has just finished feeding all the people, 5000 men plus women and children, who had gathered in a remote place where Jesus had been trying to get to in order to get by himself. I think he is still hurting inside, still needing to think through and pray about the death of John. While his heart had gone out in compassion toward all the lost and bewildered people who *also were stunned* by news of John’s sudden murder by Herod; now he needs to be compassionate toward himself. He had given them soul food so that they are all filled to overflowing, but *now he must attend to his own needs*. He has to get by himself and pray; there is an urgency about it. He doesn’t even want his disciples around. Have you ever felt like that--you just need to get by yourself so that you can pray and think? There is something he has to work out with his Father. The death of John has chilled him to his core, and he had put that aside in order to serve all the famished people, but now he has to get by himself and pray through what John’s death will mean for him.

The scene, I think, foreshadows Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane where he again wrestles with himself and prays deeply to his Abba about what lies just ahead. There are no words powerful enough to describe the intensity and profundity of the encounter so there the writer says Jesus sweats great drops of blood.

Here, in the early stages of his coming to terms with what he must do, “he makes his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side.” Their constant chattering and bickering with each other distracts him from listening to the still small voice of God. Jesus is like a parent with life changing issues to figure out who sends the children to their grandmother in order to clear a space to think and pray.

Once he gets the disciples *dispatched*, he next dismisses the crowds. “I love you but *go home*,” he says. “I need some time by myself.” It doesn’t say that *actually* but that’s how *I* would say it.

Finally it's his time and he goes up the mountain to pray. This had been his objective all along. He stays there into the night. He is on a personal retreat. His soul is agitated; in need of calming. He looks at things this way and that, he adds up what he is seeing and feeling, he thinks about John the Baptist and how his life has ended; and all the time he is praying. He brings his inner storm to God. He asks God for help, both in figuring out what to do next and then help in actually doing what he has figured out. It will take courage and wisdom beyond his own. *"Abba, please help me. I won't be able to do this unless we are together. I will need your strength."*

While Jesus is praying on the mountain the disciples are getting into trouble in their own external storm. "By this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them." All night they had rowed and strained against heavy waves and a strong wind that blew from the *northwest*. They are in deep water far out on the lake and their situation is beginning to look desperate. Now their souls are churning, their brows sweating, and their faces tense as they fight through wave after wave. They don't have time to think about anything beyond their own survival. The night seems to last forever. Have you ever felt like the disciples in that boat? Do you feel a bit that way now? Most of us, I suspect, have been there with them.

At four in the morning, when things seem *bleakest*, just as the dawn begins to break, Jesus comes walking toward them on the sea. Jesus *has resolved his conflict*, he has *embraced* the movement toward his destiny, his *Abba has answered* his prayers and **Jesus walks above the waves. He does not sink into the raging water; it's foaming and frothing does not reach him.**

In **all** ancient writing, turbulent water, the deep, the flood, symbolize **human** chaos and calamity. They represent those things we most fear. What happens when things get out of control and all hell breaks loose? What happens when human beings can't get along and they seem swept up in a power beyond reason and rationality where their only desire is to frustrate each other even if it threatens destruction on **all**? This is the deep, this is the human storm; this is the situation humanity finds itself in. We are in the midst of a huge storm and we are far out at sea. Wave after wave assault us—but the waves are of our own making. The waves are generated by our desires that cannot be calmed. They swirl and foam as we longingly look at what we think the other has and want it for ourselves thinking it will calm us. It will not. **It is another delusion that stirs the water all the more.**

Psalm 69 is the cry of those in the boat before Jesus arrives walking on water. It says,

“Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me. I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched. My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God.”

Jesus comes walking above the swirl of desires that have engulfed them and threaten them with death.

“But when the disciples see him walking on the water, they are terrified, saying, ‘It is a ghost!’ And they cry out in fear.” They had never seen anyone walk on the sea. It was so contrary to their experience that they **misidentify who it is**. They fail to see that it is their leader, Jesus and think it a ghost. Ghosts are terrifying creatures representing death and they exist only in our imaginations. They mistake the Bringer of Life for the harbinger of death. Does this not foreshadow the crucifixion where again **we misidentify the Bringer of Life** for the bringer of death and kill Jesus thinking we are doing what God wants?

Jesus knows they cannot understand who he is now, that will come later, after he has completed his mission and been **raised from the dead, just like he now rises above the swirling waters**. (Do you see how his walking on water foreshadows his resurrection?) But they can’t understand that now and so, “Immediately Jesus speaks to them and says, ‘Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.’ Can you feel the fear drain out of you when you hear these words? *“Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”* Jesus, the comforter has come. **He is here to calm the storm**. Strangely, he will calm the storm by allowing himself to be submerged in it.

The waters of our wrath will come up to his neck and then sweep over him. **He** will sink into deep mire where there is no foothold. He will be weary beyond all weariness and his throat will be parched while we will respond with cruel vinegar. His eyes will grow dim and his God will not rescue him. More in number than the hairs of his head will be those who hate him without cause. Many will accuse him falsely and gather to destroy him.

Do you see how I have used Psalm 69 to describe the crucifixion of Jesus? This is where our storm engulfs him. It is how he calms the storm. **He allows it to overtake him and then from inside it he asks his Father to forgive us for stirring up the very storm in which he is dying**. He

becomes the scapegoat, the Lamb of God, the one forsaken so that we can both see what we do and yet, see that even what we do, does not separate us from his love.

Peter, taking the risk of believing Jesus, wants to join him. “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”

Come, Jesus replies. “*Come!*” **Come through raging waters to the calm of my presence.**

I will stop here for this is the invitation communion offers us today.

Communion gives us an opportunity to come and shed our distorted human desire and in its place take into ourselves the pure desire of the Son for his Father. We can share in Jesus’ desire to do his Father’s will by *sharing in the body of Jesus broken for us and the blood of Jesus shed for us.* When we do this our eyes are lifted above the chaos of human scrambling and we find our focus on what nurtures each of us and all of us together.

This focus delivers us from the raging storm of our own making.

Amen.