“Unraveled by Uncertainty”

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Matthew 14:22-33

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This is a story of unraveling. There’s a storm, a surprise encounter with Jesus, and a miracle or two. It’s a story of faith, which can be all we have to cling to when everything we know, everything familiar unravels around us. We can relate to that these days.

Peter, Andrew, James and John…at least four of the twelve disciples had been fishermen, intimately familiar with the sea. They’d spent their lives on the sea; they knew it well. And regardless of the lives the other men had led before, their new occupation as disciples seemed to require that they spend a fair share of time in boats on the sea, traveling from town to town, preaching and teaching. And *all* the disciples were intimately familiar with Jesus.

I spent some time last week talking about mission trips and youth conferences with some of y’all, poignant because this was supposed to be the week our high school youth and their leaders would be at Montreat. Anyone who has gone on a weeklong trip like those can tell you that when you spend a week in close quarters with someone, you learn *loads* about them and become really familiar with them…the way they talk, their mannerisms, the jokes they tell, the way their feet smell, what they eat and what they leave on the plate…and that’s only after a week. Imagine how well the disciples and Jesus knew each other after traveling together for months, years, even. The disciples were intimately familiar with Jesus.

Which just goes to show that sometimes, the familiar things in our lives can storm out of control, become unfamiliar and unruly, become downright scary.

I imagine that’s what happened that night…the wind and the waves, things the disciples knew about, had become wild and contrary, and then Jesus, someone they knew very well, did something totally weird and unexpected like walking on water toward them in the eerie light of early morning. It was too much. It was really scary, it looked like something supernatural – they were terrified.

Does that ever happen to you? Do the things in your life you think you know – your family, your friends and relationships, your health, your own body – have those things ever gotten unruly, turned against you, become scarily unfamiliar?

This is how I have been feeling in the midst of this pandemic, moving across the country to a new community, a new house, a new job, with new people I can’t meet in person. My house, while perfectly lovely, feels at times like it’s closing in on me, my little family, to quote the soundtrack of Frozen II, are “my ocean and my shore,” and yet we are together *all the time* and it’s hard. And now as we witness this national uprising for racial justice, we seem to be on the brink of unraveling toxic systems, which is a positive thing, but disorienting to witness, to experience.

What do you do, when your life suddenly storms up around you and everything unravels? The disciples cried out in fear. And they heard this: “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

*Pause.*

While I was in seminary, I served as an intern at Alpharetta Presbyterian Church, and was assigned to preach on this text one summer. And in an unexplainable, unexpected unraveling, this story changed dramatically for me while I was working on my sermon, which made me panicky, as a new preacher (to be honest I’m still a little panicky over sermon-writing). I was very familiar with this story (shout-out to Church School!), practically knew it by heart. And in one moment, the way I had always read this story shifted dramatically, and my confidence unraveled as what was familiar became unfamiliar, and I’ve never since been able to read it the way I used to. I guess you could say I’ve been preaching this sermon for 15 years. I hope it’s a good one.

So. I’d always loved this next part of the story. I loved the part where Peter, after hearing Jesus call out to them in the midst of the storm, takes this awesome leap of faith. I’ve always liked Peter a lot. He is impulsive, he speaks before he thinks, he’s sometimes overly dramatic, and even though he doesn’t quite *get* what Jesus is all about, he doesn’t stop trying, even though he messes up big time. He’s just so human.

And I love that Peter is faithful, and that faithfulness is perfectly illustrated right here in this story, right here in this part, where Peter calls to Jesus, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” I mean, wow! Peter had witnessed Jesus’ miracles before, and he believed it was the real deal, and he was ready to join his rabbi – his teacher, his friend whom he loved, out there in the middle of the wind and waves. He just stepped right out there.

I would have been a little more nervous, asked a few more clarifying questions: “So, I should just step over the side of the boat, then? One foot at a time, does that matter? Are you *sure* I can really do this?” Not Peter, he just went for it. And he did it, he walked on water!

He was walking toward Jesus, on the water, when suddenly, reality “sank in,” so to speak. His phenomenal faith wavered as he lost his focus, began to fear the storm, began to think, “Oh my God, what am I doing, this is impossible, I’m going to die,” and cried out in panic as he started to sink, “Save me!”

Which, of course, is an act of faith in itself, still counting on Jesus to do the miraculous. So I had always been a little mad at Jesus for his response. Jesus says, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” What?! Peter didn’t have little faith – he had *great* faith! He walked on the water just because Jesus said he could! He didn’t even question; Jesus said “Come,” and he went! Then he got scared and started to sink, but in an act of faith called on Jesus to save him, and Jesus *chastises* him for that?

But that’s the story. And I had just resigned myself to being a little miffed at Jesus’ response here, and instead focused on Peter and his awesome leap of faith, and hoped that one day I would have faith like Peter, stepping out into chaos to move closer to God.

So, here’s what changed in my reading as I was working on this text back then: It’s still a story about great faith… but not Peter’s. I wonder now if the great faith in the story actually belongs to the disciples who stay in the boat.

Because, when they cried out in fear as they saw someone walking toward them on the water, Jesus said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” And they knew him, and they trusted him, and they stayed in the boat, sheltering in place, as it were, waiting for Jesus to come to them.

But not Peter. Peter was not content to wait in faith. Peter wanted proof. And not “Oh yeah? Then what’s your mother’s maiden name? How many fish did I eat for breakfast today?” proof, but miraculous, impossible proof.

Peter demands to do the very thing Jesus is doing: “Command me to come to you on the water.” And Jesus, having infinite patience, especially with Peter, does just that. “Come,” he says. So Peter recklessly climbs out of the boat, and does in fact walk on water… until he realizes how crazy what he’s doing is, and what’s going on around him, and what’s at risk. It’s too much for him. He starts to sink, panicking, crying out, “Lord, save me!” And of course Jesus does.

And when Jesus asked, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” maybe he didn’t mean, “Why did you doubt you could continue to safely walk on water?” Maybe he meant, “Why did you doubt that it was me? Why did you need proof? Of course it’s me, and of course I’d come to you. Of course.”

I love that Jesus would say that, rather than demanding perfection in our faith even after we’ve made a huge leap.

So really, in this story, the disciples in the boat were the ones with the great faith. They trusted him, and were not afraid, even though the wind and waves were against them, and even though they were seeing something they had never seen before and could not explain.

We all have storms in our lives, when everything familiar seems to turn against us, when our confidence and clarity unravel and we cry out in fear.

Sometimes we may need to make a leap of faith, to step out of our boats into the wind and the waves, to face what is scaring us head-on. Sometimes we may need to cry out to God, and demand proof, miracles, rescue.

But the rest of the time, perhaps the most faithful thing we can do is to stay in the boat, ride out the storm, and trust that Jesus means it when he says, “It is I; do not be afraid.” That’s harder than it sounds. It means waiting, sitting in the midst of our storms, our pain, our anxiety, as everything unravels around us.

It means sticking close to our community – the people we know and love, and realizing that they don’t have the answers any more than we do; because they are unraveled, as well.

It’s a different type of risk to take, a different way of being vulnerable.

We are meant to stay in the storm, battered by the wind and waves, and to realize that what we fear is *wind*, and *waves*, and *God*, working in a new way we haven’t seen before, moving closer to us. And God *knows* that that’s scary; that’s why we hear over and over again throughout Scripture, “Do not be afraid.”

And so we try not to be, and we stay in the boat. Even *this* boat. And in this story, it *was* really Jesus, and he *did* come to the boat, and the wind ceased, and the disciples were able to worship him, saying, “Truly he is the Son of God.”

May we have faith like the disciples who stayed in the boat, and trust that it is God, coming to meet us where we are, storms, fear, and all.

And may we have faith like Peter, flailing, drowning, and trusting that Jesus will save us, even when all seems hopeless.

May we have faith, when our world unravels, when our confidence is shaken, when our certainty fails.

May we have faith.