

Sermon: Heartfelt
Text: Matthew 14:22-33
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Context: WWPC
Second Sunday of Stewardship
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But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, ‘Take heart,
it is I; do not be afraid.’

Matthew 14:27

It was a dark and stormy night. I’m not saying that to be funny. I’m saying that because it was true.

It was a dark and stormy night. The wind was howling. The waves were building, crashing over the bow of the boat in what felt like primal chaos, the chaos of creation itself.

Now imagine that you’re Peter. You’ve spent much of your life on the water, starting when you were just a boy and your father took you out fishing with him.

You have followed in his footsteps, followed in his wake as it were. Now, you, too, spend your days out on the water, fishing. But it’s not just how you spend your days. It’s how you make your living. The sea is in your blood.

You love the way the waters smells, so clean and tangy. The way the sun glistens off the waves when the breeze is light, flashing like a million diamonds turning in the light.

You love the complete silence when all you can see in every direction is water and sky, a perfect marriage of blue.

You love the secrets that lie beneath the surface, how the depths are teeming with so much unseen life, like a living mystery. You love chasing the mystery, hunting the big shoals.

You love catching them, and most of all, you love hauling them in and taking the catch to shore and then to market. And you love the reward you get from your labor. The way fish turn into bread and lentils for your table and clothes for your family.

You love all of it. You love everything about the sea. Except for one thing. Storms. You hate the roar of the wind and the terrible power of the big waves. The chaos it creates all around you and inside of you -- the chaos on the water and in your head.

Of course you know how to swim. Every kid who grows up living near the sea knows how to swim. But honestly, you're not very good at it.

You like to fish, not swim. On a good day, in calm conditions, you could maybe make it a few furlongs if you had to. But in a storm it won't just be your boat that sinks.

It's literally your worst nightmare, to be out at sea when a big storm blows up. You don't dream it often, but when you do, it is so terrifying that you never want to be in that situation: First the water begins to crash over the gunwales, then the holds overflow. The deck is quickly swamped and the boat begins to sink, and you along with it.

So you watch the skies closely. You've learned the language of the clouds and can read the signs well.

Most of your buddies aren't like you. They're happy to go out if they think they can fill their holds before the storms come, even if it means the trip back into shore is going to be a bit rough.

Not you. Red sky at morning means a day spent mending your nets, or working in the garden with your wife, or playing with your kids, reminding yourself why you fish in the first place: to help feed and provide for them, and also why you don't go out when a big storm is coming: because you want to be around to keep providing for them, and to watch them grown up.

Which is why you're so frustrated now.

You knew the storm was coming. You could see it in the clouds. Feel it in your bad knee.

But what were you going to do? Confess to the other disciples -- most of them experienced fishermen --- that you were scared? Like you're six years old?

Plus, if Jesus knew a storm was coming, he obviously didn't care. He sent you on your way without him. He must have thought everything was going to be okay.

But then nothing seems to phase that guy. Earlier that morning you were surrounded by a huge crowd of people -- Matthew said he thought there were maybe five thousand families --- all of them hungry, all of them tired. You were far from town with no way to feed them.

You worried that they might grow so frustrated, so hungry and so angry, they might just tear you to pieces. It was such a scary moment you might as well have been out in a boat in the middle of a storm.

But it turns out, he had a plan. Or at least he found a way to feed them. Still not exactly sure how he did that, but if he can get you through that he can get you through anything.

Except one tiny problem: he's not with you. Just when you need him the most you're left to face the storm alone.

You're so afraid you don't care what the other disciples think: you're about to lay down in a corner and curl up into a little ball and start cutting deals with God in the vague hope your life will be spared.

Just then, you see what looks like a ball of light coming toward you, floating over the surface of the water. At first you think it's maybe moonlight breaking through the clouds. But no. It's not a reflection, not a ball of light. It's Jesus.

Once again, you wonder how he does such things but you've already learned it's best not to ask, unless you're ready for a lecture about faith and your lack of it.

Suddenly he shouts over the roar of the wind and the crashing of the waves. 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.'

If you weren't so scared you would have laughed right out loud. Take heart, do not be afraid? You've got to be kidding. Because here's the thing, Jesus, you may be able to walk on water, but I can't.

But then you remember what happened earlier that day, how he feed five thousand families with less food than you take on a picnic with your wife and kids. And now he's walking on the water.

Something shifts inside of you. You're sick of being afraid. Storms at sea happen all the time. And the guys always come back, usually with their holds full. You're missing out on big catches. More food for your family, more clothes for your kids.

It's time you faced down your fear. What have you got to lose?

Quick, before you can think about the answer to that question, you reply:

'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.'

'Come on then.'

And so you do. You heed that call. You swallow your fear and step over the gunwale.

It goes well for a minute, until it doesn't. Until you take your eyes off Jesus and take in the size of the waves instead.

You begin to sink. This is playing out exactly like your nightmare. Soon the water will engulf you. Soon the water will fill your lungs and you will sink to the bottom and the light will go out and your life will be over.

'Lord, save me!' You shout, just before the waves pull you all the way under.

And he does. He grips your hand in his and pulls you up, pulls you out. Pulls you to safety. And you'll remember that moment for the rest of your life.

Now imagine that you're you. You're not sitting in a boat in the middle of a storm, you're sitting here, in the safety of this sanctuary.

Who is God calling you to be, and what is God calling you to do, individually, for such a time as this?

As I was pondering an answer to that question for myself, I realized how timely this story was. I don't know about you, but right now it feels to me like we are right there in the boat with Peter. That we're surrounded by chaos.

Driving into work I often listen to my favorite podcast. It's a repeat of the previous night's episode of a popular news program on MSNBC.

There's often a break about midway through the episode in which listeners are invited to subscribe to the MSNBC daily newsletter so that you can stay even more well informed, quote, "during this unprecedented era of news."

And I always think, no thank you! My desire to stay well informed is already at its limit, already bumping up hard against my desire to stay sane.

I'll take a pass on that, thank you very much. I can only take so much chaos in any single day.

Which brings us to our theme for this season. Last week we launched our stewardship season with -- and forgive me for returning to a nautical theme for just a moment -- with a deep dive into the book of Esther.

We saw how Esther's call was large and public. It was to save her people, to intervene in a time of threat, to rise up for such a time as this.

Peter's call was small and private. It was all about him.

Their calls were different but in both case, the call scared them a little, maybe even a lot. It certainly forced them out of their comfort zones.

So let me assure you that this doesn't always happen. The call of God doesn't always have to scare you to be a genuine calling.

The good news is that the call of God -- and responding to it -- can excite you, energize you, inspire you. Yes, it will often, if not always, make more of you--ask you to do new things, learn new things, go to new places, rise to meet new challenges.

But it doesn't have to scare you. But here's the thing: It might. You might have to step over that gunwale and out on to the waves.

Or maybe your just not ready even to think about that. In light of the swirling chaos of these times, maybe you're just ready to hunker down in a corner and cover your eyes and pray until this particular storm has passed.

Either way, I have some really Good News for you, of the capital G, capital N variety. This story is not just about Peter. And it's not about you, and it's not about me.

It's about Jesus. It's about a God who reaches out when it feels like you're sinking, and grabs your hand and lifts you up to safety.

How? We'll I've learned it's best to let God decide that.

What I can say is that if you feel like you're in that boat, you're not alone. We're right there with you.

And, together, we'll keep our eyes fixed on Jesus.