

“Wind Beneath my Wings”

First Presbyterian Church
August 9, 2020

Matthew 14:22-33

Larry Kreider, in his book “Bottom-Line Faith,”¹ sees the label on the back of salad dressing where it says “Shake well before using” as a metaphor for the Christian life. “... Shaking and usefulness are twin brothers,” he says. “God doesn’t forewarn, he doesn’t explain, he just shakes.

“Shaking,” says Kreider, “is a sign of God’s involvement in our lives. If things aren’t a little turbulent, we may wonder if God is ignoring us. God doesn’t shake just for the sake of shaking. There is a reason. The stuff of life is being rearranged, and people are going to be affected.”

Now, I wouldn’t say that’s what happening in our world today – God shaking us up on purpose – but I do believe, like Kreider, that when things get shaken up, God uses those times to rearrange the world around us to make things more in line with the kingdom he’s even now bringing into being.

In our New Testament lesson, the disciples of Jesus are in the boat on the water when wind and waves begin shaking things up, shaking them to the bone. “Battered by the waves” is how Matthew puts it, “for the wind was against them.” Bible scholars agree that this story became a metaphor for the Christian life – with the boat representing the church, the water representing the world all around us, and the wind representing the Holy Spirit.

So when Matthew says “the wind was against them,” he could have just as easily said they were going against the wind, going against the Spirit of God. “And early in the morning,” Jesus “came walking towards them on the lake. But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” In other words, they did not recognize Jesus. Jesus came to them – not in a blaze of light from heaven, not in the trumpeting voice of God – but rather, Jesus came to them as a vision taking shape amid the chaos all around them, very scary and uncertain.

I wonder, as we look at the chaos all around us – protestors, and violent mobs, federal police, and political unrest, sickness and death from the unseen-yet-all-too-real coronavirus, teachers and students, workplaces and employees tossed here and there amid the scary and uncertain times we live in – I wonder where Jesus is in all of this, where is Jesus even now coming into view for us, for the world around us. And how can you begin seeing Jesus coming into focus right before your eyes?

¹ Larry Kreider in his book “Bottom-Line Faith” (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1995), 195-96.

For instance, I recently saw this on Natalie Stewart's Facebook Page (she's a church member here). Natalie wrote:

"So we haven't gone anywhere since COVID and we have been house bums, but it has been relaxing for most of the time. It is such a change as we we're always going a mile-a-minute. ... The slow down has been nice.

And then there's this from Dee Cooper, the Interim Executive Presbytery of Heartland Presbytery (our regional body):

"I truly believe that as we slow down, are more sensitively aware of what and who is around us, and are not so driven but rather inviting, our hearts are more open to connection and have quieted our world; things have changed in us. What I love, says Dee "is that the animal world is responding in so many ways with desire to connect with us." Dee loves animals, if you didn't know.

And maybe you, also, have begun to see the Spirit of Jesus coming into view. Think about it. Where is God in all of this? Are you being watchful and prayerful enough to see and embrace those hidden blessings as they come into view? Not that that's easy, -seeing Jesus amid the chaos of life, I mean, Jesus comes to the disciples amid their fear and trepidation and says, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter answers him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." ... "If it is you" Peter is not 100 percent certain; we are seldom 100 percent certain when it comes to seeing Jesus come into view, leading us onward.

And yet, we can't wait for that blazing light from heaven or trumpeting voice of God. We have to be faithful and bold like Peter when Jesus turns to us and says, "Come." When Jesus beckoned Peter, he "got out of the boat, ... walking on the water, and came towards Jesus." Remember, the boat is the church and the water is the world around us. Jesus invites Peter to join him in the world, to step beyond his place of comfort and certainty and reach out to the world around him.

Of course, "when (Peter did this, Matthew tells us that he) noticed the strong wind, (and) ... became frightened." Remember, the wind is often a metaphor for the Holy Spirit. The spirit of God moves through this world in powerful and often frightening ways, particularly when we're going in the wrong direction, rowing against the wind.

So Peter "cried out, 'Lord, save me!' Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?' Of course, Peter doubted because, like us, Peter knows how cruel and indifferent the world can be, especially when storms are raging all around us.

It's like the ship's captain when he realized they were sinking fast. He called out, "Anyone here know how to pray?" One man stepped forward. "Aye, Captain, I know how to pray." "Good," said the captain. "You pray while the rest of us put on our life jackets – we're just one short."

Yes, the world can be a cruel and indifferent place. We can relate to that, can't we? Everything around us seems to be heading in the wrong direction, swirling out of control. And yet, if we're present enough to call out to the Lord, somehow we get lifted up, just like Peter when Jesus saved him from sinking into the water, into the chaos all around him.

This is church life, people. Peter had just responded to Jesus call to come out onto the storm waves with him – to leave his place of safety and comfort – and suddenly he's in over his head. He calls out to Jesus, and the Lord lifts him up.

There was that day when you said to yourself, "I'm a follower of Jesus, and so Jesus said to you "come". And those who are truly faithful like Peter, they step out of the boat – out of their places of comfort and certainty. They become the hands and feet and heart of Jesus in an otherwise chaotic world.

And yes, you can and do get shaken up, we can and do get knocked around trying to do what's right. But Jesus is here for us. The Spirit of the Lord becomes the wind beneath our wings, lifting us to new heights and helping us to move forward.

It's not easy to be the church – to be in the boat with Jesus – when the world is spinning out of control, and yet, it's even harder to get out of the boat and do the work of ministry – mentoring others in godly living, studying and teaching about Jesus, embracing the Spirit of sacrificial giving.

It's not easy and sometimes we do get let down. But that's no reason not to try, it's no reason to stay behind in the boat while others are reaching out in faith. If we want this world to look more like the kingdom of God that Jesus saw oh so clearly, we need to step out when called to do so.

What that looks like for you, I don't know. But I do know you are called. I do know that Jesus is calling you to reach out to those in need. And I know that this church is a wonderful place to do so, a great place to be challenged, equipped and supported in ministry.

We live in a time and place where the world needs to see Jesus come into focus. So let's help that along, shall we? The next time you're asked to step out in self-sacrifice and ministry, or quiet reflection and study, be bold like Peter, be faithful like Peter and confident that the Lord will raise you up, keep you safe, and move you and the world forward toward clearer skies and calmer waters. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Ah, Lord Jesus! It is difficult enough for us to get into the boat with you. And yet we are also called to get out of the boat? To walk toward you amid the wind that howls and the rough waters that threaten to sink us.

We are called to trust that you will not let the waves swallow us whole. And yet, when you bid us come, we want to stay behind. We cry out in fear, not faith. Increase our trust in you in all things, and especially when we feel battered by the waves.

Help us to remember that not even death, nor grief, nor illness nor despair can sink us when we reach out to you and follow where you lead. We pray for those who grieve, those battling illness and disease, and for all those we keep in prayer and hold in our hearts.

For we know Lord that when we cry out to you in prayer, immediately you come to us with comfort and healing, strength and peace, lifting us out of despair and into your presence. So it is in your name we pray, using the words that you taught us, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen**