

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
August 13, 2023
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Matthew 14:22-33

I received a gift this past week ... actually two of them.

The first one was I got to attend our Tuesday afternoon bible study for the first time since ... well I can't remember. That group meets on Tuesday afternoons at 1:00 here on the campus and discusses the scripture readings for the upcoming Sunday. You're invited to attend as you are able.

And it was at the bible study that I received my second gift of the week! And that gift was in the form of the first reading and the gospel lesson for this particular Sunday. Let me explain.

The first lesson was the major translation exercise of my Hebrew final exam from my last year of seminary.

The gospel lesson was the lesson I used in my first year of seminary as the basis for an integrative Greek and gospels project ... a project that involved 16 weeks of studying this one story from the Gospel of Matthew from every angle imaginable!

These texts are two of my favorite preaching texts in all of the three-year lectionary ... for the message contained in each of them is so comforting ... not only in the original context but in our world today. And that message is all about how we experience the presence of God.

Elijah's looking to experience God's presence. He's in a cave ... sheltering in place ... so to speak ... after fleeing for his life ... likely thinking to himself ... OK God ... I've done everything according to the book ... I have been faithful ... and yet ... here I am ... alone ... and running for my life ... left to hide in this God-forsaken cave. He's got to be might we say experiencing doubt as he wonders: Where is the LORD ... the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob ... the God who brought my ancestors out of the land of Egypt ... the God who promised to be our God forever?

God hears Elijah ... whatever he might be thinking or experiencing ... and instructs him to go outside where the presence of the LORD will pass.

So out he goes ... and there's all kinds of stuff happening ... great winds, an earthquake, raging fire ... all traditional manifestations of God's presence with God's people. Yet ... God was not in the wind, earthquake or fire we're told

Instead God showed up ... in the sound of sheer silence ... also translated as a still small voice ... that followed.

And then there's the disciples ... in a boat making their way across the Sea of Galilee as Jesus had instructed them. While they might have initially been all charged up after participating in the miraculous feeding of thousands and thousands of people from what appeared to be scarce resources ... five loaves of bread and two fish ... now they're struggling to make their way across the sea ... alone in the darkness ... wind against them, waves crashing against the boat.

Then early in the morning ... Jesus joins them ... making his way across the top of the water towards the boat carrying the disciples.

The disciples are terrified ... we're told ... thinking they are seeing a ghost approaching them. And then ... Jesus speaks ... I can imagine in a calming voice ... "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

The rest of the story we all might remember from Sunday School ... Peter basically says ... "Oh yeah? Prove it! Tell me to come to you on top of the water!" In response Jesus simply says, "Come."

And things seem to be doing well ... until once again ... Peter becomes frightened and begins to sink below the surface.

Now in my past ... I had always focused on Peter's sinking and Jesus' last words in the story, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" as the teaching moment in this story which was basically saying if only Peter hadn't doubted ... if only he had remained strong in his faith ... he would not have sunk in the first place.

But I think there's something much more for us to consider from both of these stories.

And that something ... is this: in both stories of Elijah, the disciples, and specifically Peter ... it's not doubt that gets in the way of their experiencing the presence of God ... it's not doubt that prevents them from "maintaining the faith" ... it's fear.

Elijah is afraid he's going to be killed ... a realistic fear given the circumstances in which Elijah was living at the time.

The newly minted disciples are afraid of the storm, the chaos around them, and ... perhaps ... the unknown future that lies ahead when they make it to the other side of the Sea.

And enwrapped in their fear ... they have a hard time experiencing God's presence in their current circumstance.

And aren't we the same? When things get chaotic or overwhelming ... when things aren't quite working out as we had hoped ... when we turn on the TV or connect in whatever way we connect with the day's news ... when everything seems to be going

down the tubes and our lives are derailed and nothing like we imagined they would be ... when we find ourselves wondering if perhaps God has abandoned us and God's promises ... at the bottom of all that we might be expressing ... aren't we really ... afraid?

And in those moments of our greatest fear ... whether we verbalize those fears or not ... God meets us in them and makes God's presence known in the same way that God was made known to Elijah and God was made known to the disciples in the boat ... a still small voice that invites us, "Do not be afraid!"

Perhaps the gift we all receive today ... is a reminder that our faith doesn't exempt us from those moments of being afraid ... doesn't exempt us from feeling fear when the evil weeds seem to be overtaking the wheat.

Perhaps the gift we all receive today is the reassurance that ... in those moments when we are afraid ... when we are overwhelmed to the point that our fear has taken over and we long to experience God's presence as we cry out ... SAVE US ... God is with us ... and reaches out to grab our hand just as we are about to go under.

Perhaps the gift we receive today is hearing the truth about our relationship with God ... Emmanuel ... God with us. And that truth is that ... quite frankly ... if the teaching moment for Elijah, the disciples and Peter's experiences in the cave or on the water have anything to do with faithfulness ... that faithfulness ... is the faithfulness of God.

God's faithfulness ... God's promise never to abandon God's people... God's very real presence in our lives ... comes to us in the waters of baptism ... in a simple meal of bread and wine ... and quite remarkably in very quiet moments of our lives that cut through all the storms, earthquakes, fires and winds.

God's faithful real presence in our lives ... reminds us of the lengths to which God has gone to break through the noise and calm the biggest storm we face ... the fear that our bondage to sin and death creates in our lives.

God's faithful real presence hears us when life's circumstances cause us to question: Lord, if it is you ... and hears us when our struggles seem to get the very best of us ... when we can't even get out a scream SAVE US ... but can only muster a quiet whisper ... or a solitary prayer

God's faithful real presence comes to us as Jesus is standing right there beside us ... hand outstretched ... ready to grab us and drag us back into the boat once again with comforting assuring words ... "Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid."

Thanks be to God. Amen

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