

Unraveled by Uncertainty

Matthew 14:22-33

Living God, let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Our story for today is probably my favorite story in all of the gospels. It's a powerful, captivating, vivid tale full of drama and faith and rich imagery and things beyond our comprehension. But so often, this story becomes about our call as disciples to just have enough faith to do incredible things. "Oh golly, if I could just summon up enough power and faith, I too could waltz across the bathtub, skip across the puddles, and be saved. Anything less and I sink forever. Anything less and I'm just a coward in the boat."

Once again, this kind of reading makes it all about the disciples and all about us. There's a very natural sort of gravity to this kind of self-centered reading of scripture. It's hard to break out of that. And while it's important to find our place in God's story, we can't forget that it's God's story. Rather than hear this story and ask "What should I be doing?" I think it's far more important to hear this story and ask, "What is God doing?"

In this powerful account from Matthew's gospel we see a God who calms the storm, who saves, and who brings peace that inspires worship and praise. But at the same time, we see a God who is calling us to join in this salvific work and meet God in the midst of life's uncertainty. There is a tension here that we need to hold as we recognize the both/and nature of this story. Our God is big enough to bring peace and confront chaos, and the images surround this story tie it to the greater arc of God's saving work throughout scripture.

As I said before, there is so much rich imagery in this text with deep scriptural significance. In this story we see a mountain and a sea. Remember, we're talking about the Gospel of Matthew here, and throughout the arc of this whole Gospel account, there's a very specific story being told. This gospel begins with a genealogy, connecting Jesus to the great Hebrew figures of the past. In many ways, Matthew's Gospel tells the story of Jesus as a "new Moses", a deliverer. Moses went up Mount Horeb to receive the law, and Jesus proclaims his Sermon on the Mount heralding the fulfillment of the law. Mountains bear a special significance in this story, and so at the beginning of this scene in Matthew 14, Jesus goes up a mountain to pray. Mountains in scripture, particularly in Matthew's Gospel, are signs of certainty, reminders of the Law, pointing us toward closeness with God. The sea on the other hand, was often a symbol of chaos, uncertainty, fear, and death. In the beginning of this story we hear today, Jesus goes up to the mountain to pray. And well he should... he just got the news of the death of John the Baptist, his cousin and partner in this ministry of repentance and reconciliation. Jesus went to pray on the sure and certain mountain, as he began to gain clarity and certainty for what his mission would mean. Resisting the might of imperial Rome, overturning the injustices of the Temple elite, and upending systems of honor and shame in his culture was dangerous work that would anger powerful people, and would in the end cost him his life. On the mountain he went to pray over this certainty.

Then Jesus walks out onto the water—the roiling stormy sea—to meet his disciples. From the certainty of the mountain top, God’s certain love and redemption walks across the face of the chaos, not consumed by it, but transforming this bedlam with the peace of God. The certainty of God’s promises and redemption meet us in the midst of our uncertainty. This is precisely where God shows up. Into the chaos and deep brokenness of the world, God is meeting us, God is calling us, God is offering salvation through love and hope. And in the end—as it will be when the long arc of God’s saving work is done—God brings peace and reconciliation, calming the storm and restoring the fortune of God’s beloved people.

This is who God is. God is the one who brings both the certainty of hope and the clarity of our shared mission into the chaos of our lives. Both the one with the call to follow in the midst of chaos without the promise of safety but with the promise of transformation and new life; AND the one who saves and redeems. As certainly as Peter found the hand outstretched to save him, we too will find Christ pulling us up out of our sorrow and fear, gathering us in around the certainty of God’s saving love.

NOW, knowing what God is doing in this story, can we begin to see it from Peter’s eyes. The ghostly vision of Christ walking across the waters, a sign of hope in the midst of chaos that Peter for a moment forgets the dangers of storm raging around them and knows only the hope and love of the Christ he sees. Peter abandons fear and assumptions, unravels his doubts and uncertainties and calls out to Jesus, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” And Jesus said, “Come.”

Can we recognize for a moment how absurd this story is? Humans can’t walk on water. Any moment before all this happened, Peter would have been certain of that, but seeing the transformative presence of Christ out there in the midst of the chaos unraveled that uncertainty and doubt in such a way that Peter *could* walk on the water. He trusted in Jesus, and it led him to walk in a new way of life that he never before dreamed was possible. No, we’re not being called to walk on the bathtub today, that’s not the point. But God is still calling us to walk in ways that we never thought possible, in ways of justice and love and hope and peace and unity and sacrifice and resistance and joy that seemed like foolishness mere moments ago, but with a presence of peace that surpasses all understanding, Christ is beckoning to us to join him on these waters of absurd, mind-boggling hope and new life. Christ unravels Peter’s uncertainty.

And then Peter is unraveled *by* uncertainty. Then the panic set in in the midst of this spectacular moment, and Peter began to sink. This way of Christ was glimpsed, only for a moment, as Peter walked and sank. This happens. There are waves of fear and uncertainty that beset our world constantly. There are waves of indifference and injustice and suffering and shame and racism and division and rejection and fear and sickness and death that threaten to overtake us. There are winds blowing lies into our hearts that say we are not enough and not worthy and not able to live authentically and not loved. These storms in life are real, but God is walking through these storms to meet us in the midst and call us to new life. Christ is rebuking the wind and waves, decrying the storm, and declaring that these things will no longer hold power in the new life we’ve found through the waters. Christ brings peace by naming us beloved, declaring our belonging, and resisting all lies that say otherwise.

I love this story from Matthew's gospel because we see it play out time and time again. Jesus is calling us and calling us and calling us out of our comfortability on the boat, out of our fear, out of our carefully laid and "certain" plans further and further out on to the waters. God puts a call in our heart to follow and serve and live boldly with hope and assurance and it all just seems ABSURD. It's about as ridiculous and uncertain as—oh I don't know...—walking on water. And yet there's Jesus, calling us out to the uncertain places to put our full trust in his love, his salvation, his way of abundant life here and now. AND promising that he will meet us with a sure hand in the midst of chaos. And as surely as Christ will be there to offer us a hand, there will also be wind and waves. As our story shows, Christ CAN calm the storm, and he will. For now, as injustices and pain and fear rise throughout our world, we are called out to the stormy waters to bear witness and Decry the Storm...

Whether it's Peter's doubts and uncertainty being unraveled as he steps out of the boat, or Peter's little faith being unraveled into worshipful praise, or even the disciples fear being unraveled as peace is made known in the midst of the storm, God is unraveling our lives in love. Even our certainties can bind us in fear, and God is pulling out knots and hemming us in to this grand vision of a tapestry of hope. God is weaving us together into a community of peace, unravelling the despair we've sown into our lives. God is untying the bonds of injustice, cutting loose all threads that hold God's children in the bondage of oppression, and God is calling us to join in this work... all the while promising that as we step out of the boat and into the wide and oftentimes uncertain calling of God, Christ's love will be there to pull us up, unravel our uncertainty, and let us walk in certain hope. This hope can transform our lives, and we as followers of the risen Christ have the audacity to believe that it can transform the world.

Today in worship, we will witness another delivery through stormy waters as Elise Driver is baptized into Christ. We as a community will step out onto the waters with her, renounce the devil and all forces of evil—rebuking the power of the wind and waves—and turn our hearts with her to Christ's saving hand. This same hand has drawn each of us up through the waters of baptism to walk in new and abundant life. And this baptism, this saving hand that draws us up out of the waters is not a one time thing, but a wellspring of promise to which we can go again and again. The promises abound as God continues to unravel our uncertainties and our certainties, that we might live in new hope, and share with the world a new way of life. In the midst of the storms of life that we face even now, let us worship and praise the God who is doing wondrous things.

This is not a story about us just having enough faith to face the wind and waves and walk on the water. This is a story of how God has already lifted us up, and is calling us to join in the new life we have found through this saving grace on the waters. God is calling us to engage in great works of love, because God's love is already there, waiting for us to "come." Wind and waves will rise, but we pray today, that just as God has done for Elise, and for all of us, God will continue to unravel our uncertainties that we might reveal God's transformative and abundant hope in all we say and do.

Amen.