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Matthew 14:22-33

Sunday, August 9, 2020

Reflection: Crossing Rough Waters

I wonder why it seems to take the most challenging times of life for us to sense God's presence most clearly. Now, I'm not saying that it should be this way, or that it's always this way, or even that God only appears when we most need God – certainly some of you would argue just the opposite, that it seems like God feels most distant when we're struggling. But I just think that there's something about significant challenges and trials in life that bring clarity to our priorities and cut through the distractions of everyday life so that we may see God more clearly.

I think that's at least part of what's going on in today's Gospel reading. After feeding the thousands who followed him into the wilderness, Jesus commands the disciples to head across the sea without him while he stays on the shore to send the crowds on their way and then spend some time in communion with his Father on the mountain. While the disciples are crossing, a storm arises that threatens to overwhelm them and they spend the night anxiously navigating the waves, until the early hours of the morning when Jesus strolls across the water to meet them.

The disciples fearfully mistake Jesus for a wave-walking ghost, and then they grow even more terrified the closer he gets. Jesus reassures them that he is the one who's coming to them, and while this initially inspires Peter to ask if he might join Jesus out on the water, Peter soon remembers the height of the waves and depth of the sea and loses heart. Jesus then reaches out and grabs him and comments on his lack of faith, and then it's at this moment that the disciples see Jesus as if for the first time, confessing, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Which is really interesting to me, because when you think about it. Jesus had just fed thousands of helpless and vulnerable people, revealing his divine power and compassion. And yet it's here, in this extreme moment, when the disciples perceive most clearly who Jesus is.

So, part of what strikes me about this passage is how it reveals something so deeply true about our humanity, and I have a hunch that the disciples aren't alone in this realization. At least in my own life I know that far too often I've overlooked God's presence in the peaceful and relatively calm moments of my life, only to find myself crying out when things turned difficult.

And while I'm not exactly sure why this is, I think part of it has to do with the fact that we spend a fair amount of our time and energy trying to establish a safe, stable, and secure life, both for ourselves and those we love. And although there's nothing wrong with that per se, more often than not I think we mistakenly take comfort in our modest success and then come to assume that we no longer need God – or at least forget how much a part of our lives God is and desires to be. Or perhaps, maybe it's that we confuse safety and stability with an abundant life. Either way, we may forget how much we depend on God, until tragedy strikes in the form of illness, or job loss, or the end of a relationship, or some serious mistake we've made, and then suddenly our need for God becomes painfully clear.

But today's Gospel story doesn't only tell us about ourselves, it also tells us about God. But no matter what it is that reminds us of our need for God – God nevertheless still responds. And just as Jesus reassures the disciples and reaches out to grab hold of Peter, so too God responds to us with compassion and support. God not only responds to our need, but actually desires that we seek to live lives of abundance and courage. Notice that Jesus actually commanded the disciples to cross the sea to go ahead of him, trusting them to navigate both the sea and the storm.

And I think this is still God's desire for us. God desires that we trust that God is with us and for us and because of this we can live with courage and hope, taking chances, risking ourselves in relationships, seeking the welfare of the individuals and community around us, all while remembering that even when we overlook God's presence, God is always there. Sometimes to encourage us to overcome our fears, sometimes sending us out ahead, and sometimes reaching out to grab hold of us in forgiveness, mercy, comfort, and grace. My friends, God is encouraging us to cross rough waters and even to step out of the boat in faith, trusting that God is there to grab hold of us in any need.

And quite honestly, I think we all need to hear these words of promise and hope, because at times each one of us may wonder why we've been sent to cross what feels like rough water, or why God is calling us out of our comfort zone – especially when all we want to do is just remain in the safety and security of the boat. So, no matter where you find yourself this particular season of your life, know this – God is there for you, revealing God's presence, promising comfort, and calling you to stretch, grow, and live into the abundant life that God has promised, trusting that God is always with you. Thanks be to God. Amen.