

August 7, 2011
 Psalm 85: 8-13
 Matthew 14: 22-33
 "Get Out of the Boat"

There is a story of a student at an evangelical Christian college who repeated defined faith as "stepping out of airplanes, knowing that God will catch you." My response is that surely God has better things to do than catch folk's stupid enough to step out of airplanes.

Similar to the strange notion that God's purpose is to rescue us from ridiculous actions, Mathews story of Jesus walking on the water with Peter can spawn bad theology. If Peter's escapade becomes evidence that God wants us to demonstrate our faith by taking pointless risks that is bad theology. God can see right into our hearts. God does not need to test us with outrageous actions. True in Genesis God did indicate that Abraham was to sacrifice Isaac as an outward sign of his inward devotion, but God stopped him before any harm came to Isaac.

Not only are we suppose to honor and care for our lives we are we are not suppose to test God. Prayer is not for bargaining with God. Promising to do something or stop doing something if God answers are request makes good too small. This kind of interaction shrinks our God down to mere human form. People bargain, God bestows.

Another part of this scripture that also creates incorrect theology is when Jesus says: "you of little faith, why do you doubt?" We may believe that Jesus is saying it is wrong to admit our fears and doubts. We might believe that when bad things happen to us it is because we have little faith. That kind of theology is not where the scripture from Matthew or our Psalm leads us. Both scriptures are about how God and Jesus will be present in our lives, but not as EMTS.

One of my favorite jokes is just about how God rescues. A man is drowning and someone come to his rescue in a rowboat, but he waves then away saying "God will save me". Next a big motorboat comes and tries to get him to climb in, but again no thank you God will save me. Finally a helicopter flies down, to save him but once again he refuses because he knows God will save him. He drowns and when he faces God he asks, God why didn't you save me? God answers well I sent a rowboat, a motorboat and a helicopter what did you want?

Sometimes we don't recognize what God's rescue looks like because we are so entrapped by our perceptions of what God should look like.

So after hours of being without Jesus, and in a boat being knocked about by stormy seas, the disciples are afraid. Peter looks across the water and sees someone coming, not in another boat but walking on the water. The fishermen were accustomed to being concerned about storms. But seeing a person walk on the water terrified them. It must be a ghost!

Jesus understands their fear and what he says to Peter is what we would expect. He says, "Take Heart, it is I."

This makes perfect sense, anytime someone scares you they would normally say, hey it me, don't be frightened! But for all us exegetical scholars, the specific wording is very important! Jesus says ego eimi, (Egho eemeh) which simply translated mean it is I. But more is being suggested here. For Matthew's audience, this Greek phrase is packed with significance. There are the words the Septuagint uses to translate the Hebrew name of God revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14). Jesus is telling the disciples just what they have been trying to figure out, that he is the Son, a part of God. I just love having the chance to use all that seminary education. But unfortunately I believe the significance of this unique term is lost on Peter because he frightened.

Prove that you are Jesus; he says, call me out onto the waves, keep me from sinking. So Jesus responds with "come." So Peter, only Peter gets out of the boat and at first he is doing fine. Peter's focus is on Jesus and he staying afloat. But then the stormy sea diverts his attention and when he thinks about how scary his position is, he sinks. He cries out "Lord save me!" and Jesus stretches out his hand and catches him.

Toddlers learning to walk are a lot like Peter. They pull themselves up, tentatively let go and start to walk. Usually a parent or a sibling is encouraging them and they start to totter toward them. If their gaze changes and they look at the floor or they realize that no one is holding on to them they often plop right to the ground. Like Peter it isn't that they don't want to walk it is about their focus.

It is similar to one of my favorite passages in Hebrews, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great of a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith." When Peter is focused on Jesus he is buoyant and when he is looking at the waves he sinks.

So Jesus calls us out of our boats, knowing that we will be afraid and letting us sink just a little, with the knowledge that he is present to help. Not exactly like stepping out of an airplane but still pretty scary. Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling, calling for you and for me " goes the old gospel song. Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling you to risk your life, to throw caution to the wind, to step out of the boat.

Jesus is calling us not out of the stormy sea, but into its crashing waves. Peter's brave step into the sea also created a wonderful opportunity. If he had instead just waited in the boat he would have missed the opportunity to recognize just who Jesus was and to be rescued by Jesus. Peter's step into the stormy sea was not to test Jesus and his powers but to test Peter. Did Peter really believe that Jesus was who he said he was or was he just a ghost? Peter and the other disciples had a lot of doubt, can you blame them? Trust in the divine, especially in the human divine was a very new concept. They were asking then, the same question we wrestle with today, who was, who is the Jesus and can he keep us from drowning in the waves?

William Willimon has this to say about this scriptural passage: "I wonder if too many of us are merely splashing about in the sea shallows and therefore have too few opportunities to test and deepen our faith. The story today implies if you want to be close to Jesus, you have to venture forth out on the sea, you have to prove his promises through trusting his promises, through risk and venture."

I am sure that many of feel as if we are alone in our boats after Jesus has sent us ahead while he stays behind. I know that I have felt like the wind and the sea were slamming into my boat. I have had times that I really felt alone in my boat, wondering where Jesus was. These might be times when I questioned my call or when my children seemed determined to make my life difficult or when I realized that working in the church is not a guarantee that everyone is nice. But even though there was strife I was still where I was most comfortable, in my boat.

Each of us has our own boats. It is the place that we live most of the time. It could be thought of as our safe zone, or at least one of comfort. Like the disciples we are use to our boats being tossed about from time to time by understandable things like wind and storms. We realize that most likely we will be able to weather this storm and that it will eventually calm own and the sun will once again shine. If we can just hang on and not do anything that will make our trip more hazardous. Sit tight, ride out the storm. Keep our heads down and let the winds blow over us and we will come out OK after the storm has passed.

I most want to hunker down in my boat when someone brings up a topic that I don't want to discuss or one that I don't want to have to speak out on. I want to stay in my boat where there is a person I don't want to talk to or am afraid to approach. It might be because they are different, or they are a little scary. Because I know that if I step out into that storm of ideas and disagreements I may drown, or at least get beat up. That kind of thinking might have been Peter's as he was trying to deal with the dangerous storm and a ghost walking on the water. Peter wants to believe that it might be Jesus and that he might be coming to save them, but on the other hand it could be something that would harm him. So he calls out, Jesus is that you if so make me walk on water too! So here is Peter wanting to believe and taking those first steps until he feels himself begin to sink and he reaches out and yep Jesus is right there to catch his hand.

Is this a test? What boat are you being called to step our of? What constitutes the stormy sea for you? Jesus isn't calling us out on a nice day with pleasant weather; no he is calling us out into the storm. Step out into the storm and see if God is really present. It is sort of a test, but when you think of it who else but God would have the audacity to call their child out of a boat and into the waves? And most importantly whom else would you listen to and whom might you follow? That would have to be Jesus.

Guillaume Appollinaire wrote a quote that poetically speaks this message from our God.

"Come to the edge, He said. They said, We are afraid. Come to the edge, He said. They came. He pushed them... and they flew."