Sermon for August 9, 2026
The Reverend Amanda Gerken-Nelson

I know we have quite a few sailors and boat people in this congregation, let me ask you – have you ever weathered a storm in the open water on a boat before?

What was it like?

Were you alone or with someone else?

When facing a storm like that, what's your top priority? What are you most concerned about?

I ask, obviously, because of the connection with this morning's gospel reading – in it Matthew tells a tale of Jesus and his disciples and a stormy sea

They had just fed over-5,000 people and Jesus asks for some alone time, so he commands his disciples to go out in a boat to cross to the other side of the sea while he prayed – interesting that it's a *command* from Jesus – considering everything that happens – but, shouldn't be a problem, many of his disciples were fishermen after all

While they're out there, a storm rolls in and the disciples are being battered by waves and tormented by the winds – it must have been a serious storm

With no real explanation as to how or why, Matthew tells us that Jesus walks out on the water towards his friends – which terrifies them because they think he's a ghost

The storm? they were weathering, but this apparition on the water was a whole other level of spooky

So, Jesus reassures them "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

In the original Greek the “it is I” is actually the same words that were used by the burning bush to Moses when Moses asked what God’s name was: “I am”

Peter (oh Peter), in an effort to prove his faith or something, asks Jesus to let him come out to him on the water and Jesus consents

But as he comes out onto the frothy waters he gets scared and begins to sink

Jesus reassures him and brings him back to the boat

“Why did you doubt?” Jesus asks Peter, and then once they’re settled into the boat, the winds die down, the storm passes, and the disciples are shocked “Truly you are the Son of God”

Now, there’s probably an even larger number of us this morning who are not actual sailors but who are metaphorically sailors on the seas of life, and I wonder for you: have you ever had to weather a storm on the open waters before?

Think for a moment: What was it like?

Were you alone or with someone else?

When facing a storm like that, what’s your top priority? What are you most concerned about?

Matthew’s story about Jesus is likely a story for us metaphorical sailors as much as it is a story that actually took place at sea

It’s a pretty good set up to give Jesus a heck of a line: “Take heart, I am; do not be afraid” – if there were any doubts about who Jesus was, he has just made it very clear!

And, as with any great story, there are real implications, meanings for us in this story especially thinking about the narrative as a metaphor

First and foremost this wonderful reminder that Jesus comes to the disciples – not because they were calling out to him but because they needed him

And Jesus wasn't some siren off on the shore calling out to them and guiding them to safety, nor is Jesus a lighthouse flashing signs to warn of edges and cliffs to keep them safe

No, our Jesus is the one who trudges across the waters into the storm to find us where we are on our boats – not some safe distance away saying "you can make it" but right alongside us in the boat

Some folks when they read this story really focus on Peter and it can make it seem – still metaphorically – that this is a story about how storms test our faith like Peter's faith was tested as he stepped outside the boat

But, I think if that were the case Jesus would have called out to Peter, and to all of them, "if you have faith come out to me – meet me where I am"

And that's not at all what Jesus does, Jesus bee lines it for his friends

It seems this story is more saying: storms happen and our faith reminds us that in these moments we are not alone, Jesus comes to us

And, I think a second real implication of this story emphasizes even more this idea that we are not alone

Peter was convinced that what he needed to do in that storm was step OUT of the boat to go find Jesus

So he does, and he can, and Jesus even says “OK, come,” and, ultimately, it’s way harder than he thinks and he gets nervous and starts to sink

And next, what does Jesus do?

He reaches out his hand to catch his friend, and then Jesus guides him back to the boat

He doesn’t take Peter’s hand, steady him, and say “yes, well done, now we will stay here until the others are brave enough to also try to walk on water”

Rather he steadies Peter and then guides him back to where his friends are

Dr. Mitzi Smith from Columbia Theological Seminary in GA writes: “Sometimes faith is seeing the boat for what it is—a shared experience and the opportunity to lean on one another, to encourage each other in the storm while waiting on God. Peter was eager to leave his shipmates and to join Jesus, rather than to wait for Jesus to join them in the boat…Jesus reached out his hand and caught Peter, and they both got into the boat with the other disciples. It is when they are all in the boat together with Jesus that the winds calm down.”[1]

It’s as if Jesus knows, we were meant to weather storms together, not alone.

But, how often do we try to go it alone? Tough something out, not let our weakness show, try to be strong, not bother others with our worries, fix it before someone notices

For a long time some of us have been taught that this was the best way to handle the stormy seas, right?

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[1] https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-19/commentary-on-matthew-1422-33

It matches the individualism our society so seems to prize – be your own hero!

But the more I watch hero movies the more I realize that a hero never operates in a vacuum!

Harry Potter had…Hermione and Ron

Frodo Baggins had…Sam, Merry, and Pippin

Luke had…Han and Lea

Even the individual superheroes like Captain America and The Hulk come together as the Avengers to save the world!

Great epochs, while they might be named for a leading character, are so often the story of how people and situations come into that individual's life and help them get through a certain challenge

One of the most profound truths about the creation stories in Genesis, to me, is that I firmly believe those stories help to remind us that God created all things to be in relationship to each other and it is when we are out of relationship with each other that we are most out of relationship with God

Jesus leads Peter back into the boat with his friends, back into relationship

"Why did you doubt?" – to me, this isn't as much the existential question it comes across as, but perhaps more the kind of rhetorical question you might ask your child: "why did you bump into the table? because you weren't watching where you were going"

"Why did you doubt? because you left your community who hold you and strengthen you, who comfort you and support you in faith."

When your waters are choppy and you’re feeling tumbled about, what if you resisted the temptation to tough it out and go it alone, and instead felt Jesus coming to you and guiding you back into community, back to friendships, back to family, back to your boat, back to your faith

Why do we doubt? Why do we doubt our faith, why do we doubt that things will work out, why do we doubt that everything's going to be alright?

Because we feel like we have to go it alone and so we distance ourselves, leave, our community who hold us, strengthen us, comfort us, and support us in faith

As we acknowledge this, feel Jesus coming to you, gently guiding you back to the boat, and the waters calming

Take heart, I am, Jesus said, do be afraid!

May it be so, Amen.