

*He Said, "Come!"*

Shepherd's Grace Church

August 10, 2014

<sup>22</sup>Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. <sup>23</sup>And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, <sup>24</sup>but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. <sup>25</sup>And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. <sup>26</sup>But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. <sup>27</sup>But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." <sup>28</sup>Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." <sup>29</sup>He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. <sup>30</sup>But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" <sup>31</sup>Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" <sup>32</sup>When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. <sup>33</sup>And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." (Matt. 14: 22-33) (Also read Rom. 10: 5-15)

Last week, we encountered Jesus in a deserted place where he had withdrawn to pray. He wanted to be alone but great crowds followed him. They were there because he was there. He was there because...well why was he there. Why did Jesus need to go out to a deserted place to pray? Could he not have prayed in Capernaum? His home was there! Could he not have prayed in Tiberius? That town was just a short walk from Capernaum! There was a synagogue there. He could have prayed there.

As we discussed last week, Jesus was just informed about the needless death of John the Baptist. Perhaps he wanted to remember the deserted wilderness John came from. Perhaps in his grief he wanted to connect with the kind of life John experienced. People, even Jesus who was fully human, experience grief in their own way and each way is unique to the individual. Perhaps in his grief, Jesus withdrew in order to pray and process.

We do not know the reason and 21<sup>st</sup> century psychology is not appropriate to first century events. The people of Jesus' day were not motivated by the same issues we are driven by today. Without speculating further maybe the scripture yields some clue. In verse 13 it is said the He withdrew to a deserted place. Similarly, in chapter 4 Jesus withdraws to a deserted place to pray and be tempted. As he overcomes temptation, he encounters the strength of God willing to work through Him.

Just as God led the Hebrew people out of Egypt and into a deserted place to demonstrate God's power, so now God leads Jesus out, out of temptation to react to John's death with an unwarranted display or power. It is not inconceivable that Jesus, learning of John's death at the hands of Herod might have been tempted to take matters of judgment into His own hands. Even though He was fully God, while in human form, he set aside Godly authority. It is God's responsibility to judge and determine appropriate action. Man must overcome the temptation to impose his own will. The prophet Habakkuk tells us this in chapter one of his writing when asking how long God will allow evil to go unpunished.

The purpose of his question is to call God to action. God reminds him, and us, that even in the midst of the evil and violence Habakkuk describes it is possible for God to be at work. As we learned last week from the Prophet Isaiah, "God's ways are not our ways and as high as the heavens are above the earth, so are God's ways above ours." God's point to Habakkuk and to us is that even in the midst of violence and evil, God can be working and we would not recognize the work.

Perhaps then, from scripture we can understand that Jesus withdrew in order to demonstrate his willingness to follow God and to bow to the sovereignty of God, working in the death of John to bring about the ultimate presence of God's kingdom. Following that thought a little further, we can understand that the people followed Jesus out just as they followed Moses. They believed this one who was speaking to them of "the Kingdom of Heaven (Matt. 4)" was a prophet from God and that He had power to perform God's miracles even under the most difficult of circumstances.

This willing people found food in the wilderness just as the willing followers of Moses found food centuries before them. By the word of God they were fed until all were filled but as we noticed last week, they were not fed by Jesus. They were fed by the disciples, by the church, by those already called to the ministry ushered in by Jesus! They were fed by the faithful. They were fed by the church!

The feeding in the wilderness, this second feeding was accomplished by God in the name of Jesus through willing and faithful people! The imperfection of this people is obvious. They wanted to seclude themselves, to cut themselves off from the rest of the world. Their words to Jesus were, "Send them Away!" They believed in their personal salvation and not in salvation of the world. They did not, as yet, understand the fullness of God's plan for creation. They did not understand that redemption would come not for the few who believed but for all who would come to believe because of their faith!

As we read in Romans this morning, "Who will go into heaven to bring Christ down or who will go into Hades to bring him up?" The answer is no person. There is no one who by their work can make God available to creation. No person can perform the miracles of God or reveal the true nature of God. That is only accomplished by God and in our world by God through Jesus Christ. All who believe this, all who "profess with their mouth that Christ was crucified, that is brought down to the ultimate disgrace of death on a tree and "Who believe in their hearts that God raised him from the dead," that is that God alone overcame the grip of evil on the world in order to redeem the world through Jesus "will be saved!" This salvation comes not from any merit on our part but by the Grace of God through Jesus Christ and His willingness to sacrifice Himself for the salvation of the entire world!

While the disciples did not yet understand this, while the church still struggles to understand it today, it is the mission of the church to go into the world and overcome our own lack of understanding in order that we might welcome all people not through their merit or ours, but through this same Grace into the full meaning of the church. It is for this reason that Jesus puts the disciples, the church on the boat this morning. Jesus offers the church, the disciples who have just witnessed God's promise of abundance an opportunity to go out into the world, in this case, onto the sea to share the good news!

As the church sets sail on the seas of God's creation, Jesus dismisses the crowds. In dismissing them, he recognizes that they, the rest of the world are not yet ready for faithful response. It is important that

the church not dismiss this understanding casually. Often times, guests come into our midst. It is our responsibility in those moments to offer them radical hospitality! We are to feed them the word of God, to quench their thirst for the "living water" and to invite them to see the power of God at work in our midst! Some will accept our invitation and remain with us, become faithful and go out onto the seas of the world to share what we have shared with them. Many will be dismissed, not yet ready to receive the fullness of God's promise. Those who are dismissed are not to be forgotten; instead, they are to be cherished, prayed for until such a time as they are moved to return. For this reason, Jesus withdraws up the mountain alone, just as Moses did to pray for the people who have not yet understood the fullness of God's invitation!

Too often, the church fails to follow the example set by Jesus this morning. Too often, the church wants to remain safely in its sanctuary secluded from the world, welcoming only those who look and think like we do. Too often the church wants to be a church of the world where exclusion, lack of resources, and arbitrary judgment are practiced. Jesus sets us out upon the seas of creation not to protect us, but to encourage us that life is not predictable, life is not easy, life is not lived in isolation. Jesus wants the church, the boat of safe sanctuary to know that life is precious and fragile and always to be valued!

He demonstrates this to the church, to the disciples that very night. The church sails out into the world on calm seas. The church feels safe inside the sanctuary of the boat but soon the seas of the world start to toss and turn. The boat, the sanctuary is beaten and battered by the waves and the wind. The world does not recognize the message of salvation and redemption the church brings. The church does not recognize that all are welcome. There is turmoil, dissension, disagreement. The boat becomes in danger of sinking and succumbing to destruction in the world. The church, the boat is now far removed from the calm of Sunday morning and the presence of Jesus. The church is now facing Friday and crucifixion and death. If only there were some way to overcome this seemingly certain death!

The church, the disciples look out from the tossed and turning boat, from their once safe sanctuary, now frightened and fearful for their very lives and in the midst of the storm they see a ghost! Terrified they cry out! In their encounter with the world however, the church has forgotten what to cry! They cry for money! They cry for justice! They cry for peace! They cry for mercy! They cry! Because they have forgotten who they are however, the world continues to pummel them. The world continues to beat at and batter their once safe sanctuary. Their boat, tossed and turning on the sea is insignificant and irrelevant. The church is one more small speck on the sea of seemingly endless turmoil!

The church looks at the violent sea and sees everything as frightening. The church looks out and all it can see is the world. It sees shadows and imagines that everything and everyone in the world is against it. The reality for the church is that it has become just like the rest of the world. It cannot imagine anything beyond the beating, the battering, the betrayal that has befallen the rest of the world. In the shadows of this reality, it sees ghosts. It sees the images of saints past. It sees the Dietrich Bonhoeffers of the past who speak loudly: "Silence in the face of evil is itself evil. God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act!" The church is reminded that it has ignored and even martyred those who have spoken as a voice of a different reality. It is further reminded that it has not acted, it has not changed, it has not been the voice of God in a world where the voice of Evil speaks so loudly.

The church, the boat; beaten and battered by the waves of the world is on the brink of capsizing but even at that, it is more frightened of finding dry land because in approaching dry land it is afraid it will be dashed on the rocks! The church looks around and cannot find any safe place in the storm so it cries out in seeming futility. Just like the crowds that were on shore when Jesus came off the boat, the church finds itself in need of compassion in a cold and compassionless world! The church would like to stay in the safety of sanctuaries on Sunday mornings but the church has discovered that their sanctuary is not very safe.

The world has attacked, senselessly killing off the fundamentals of the church. The world has taken prayer from schools. The world has introduced sexuality into the pastorate. The world has revealed priests and pastors willing to participate in the abuses of those unable to protect themselves from abuse! The world has labeled the church a fraud and has come after the church time and again for participating in the things of the world! In Bonhoeffer's day it was written, "First they came after the blacks but I was not black so I said nothing. Then they came after the Jews but I was not a Jew so I said nothing. Next they came after the Catholics but I was not a Catholic so I said nothing. At last they came after me and there was no one left to speak!"

The church, beaten and battered in the winds of the world is floundering in the sea today because it will not speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves. The Christian right counters the liberal left of the church blocking attempts to bring young children, refugees from Central American violence beyond anything they can ever comprehend to a place of safety and shelter! The church, ignoring the real problems of people suffering senseless child abuse would rather argue about gay marriage and the sexual orientation of their priests and pastors. The church, eager to talk about some forms of sexuality, those that do not affect most of the church refuses to condemn adultery and the evil and divisive influence that sexual sin has on families because that sin has become too rampant that it is no longer repugnant. That sin has become so commonplace that many of the members of the church are guilty of it and the church fears loss of membership if it speaks out too forcefully against it! The church has become so like the world that most of the world does not recognize the church! The church has become so like the world that even the church has trouble distinguishing itself.

So, in the midst of the storm, the church is powerless to do anything but cry out! Just as the people in the days of Moses cry out, even after 400 years of slavery and oppression, even after 400 years in a place the Lord told them not to go, even after 400 years of ignoring the promise that God made to their ancestors the people cry out and God hears their cries. Despite their unfaithfulness, their idolatrous practices, their ignorance of and apathy toward God, God hears their cries! God sends a redeemer to rescue them in spite of their reticence.

This morning, as the disciples find themselves in the midst of the same storm they too cry out! Their judgment is clouded and their vision impaired but still they cry out from fear and fatigue! What they see, they cannot believe. What they hear they cannot understand because they have forgotten. "Take heart, do not be afraid," they hear. The church is so crippled that all it can do is be afraid. The church feels so alienated and abandoned in the midst of the storm that it cannot imagine anything but fear. Who is that is that says "Take heart, do not fear." Who is coming toward us, walking in the midst of the

storm, confidently treading past the waves of bitterness and hatred that crash around him as if they are but tiny bumps in the road? Who can it be?

When Moses was being sent to the Hebrews enslaved in Egypt, he asked, "Who shall I say sent me?" God answered tell them, I AM sent me. (Ex. 3) Tell them the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob sent me. Tell them the God of promise, the God of life, the God of creation, the one true God sent me! Tell them and they will believe!

As the disciples listened, the one walking on the waters of the world said, "Take heart, do not be afraid, I AM!" Most translations use the phrase "It is I," but the Greek of Matthew's gospel uses the same words that the Greek of John's gospel uses to translate, "I AM!" When the disciples hear, they find cause to pause. In the midst of the storm perhaps once more, God has heard their cries! In the midst of the storm perhaps there is a reason to hope. God heard the cries of our people in Egypt. God heard the cries of our people in Babylon during their exile there. Could God hear our cries even now?

Peter tests the question. "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water," he says. What is Jesus' response? He said, Come! He said, step out of the shadows, step out of hiding, step out of fear and face the world. Let yourself feel the waves of anger and hatred and persecution. When you are reviled by these waves you are blessed for so it was with the prophets of old! (Matt. 5.11) When you are persecuted in my name, when you are pummeled for my sake you will find life. He said, Come!

If any of you are water skiers, you know that when you ski, you have to put the skis on in the water. Some people try to put them on in the boat but usually the skis fall off when they jump in the water. To become prepared to ski, to walk on the water, you have to get out of the boat and put the skis on. Once you get in the water you have to swim to your skis. You trust your life jacket to keep you afloat and when you arrive at the skis, you grab one and begin to put it on. As you struggle with the first ski, you swallow water as the waves wash over you. You cough and spit and fight with your body to get into position. Finally you get one ski on only to discover that the other has floated away. You swim to it but with one ski on, a normal swimming motion is not effective. It is not until you relax and give up your fear that you find a way to get to the other ski! With one ski still on, getting the second one on is a matter of continuing to overcome your fear. You have to relax and let the one ski and your life preserver keep you afloat while you maneuver your second ski on to your foot!

Now, with both skis on, you look for the rope, your lifeline to the boat. It is far from you but you have to trust the driver of the boat to bring it back around. The boat brings the rope around so you can easily grab hold and the boat puts you in a position to ski. As the boat takes all the slack out of the rope you can feel the tension. You fight to stay calm as you slowly start to move forward. You give the signal to the boat and you hear the roar of the engine just a split second before you feel the boat start to pull you forward. You lean back and feel the boat pull you into a standing position. You are now out of the water, walking on it, gliding across the smooth glass the wake of the boat has created behind it. In the smooth of this glassy water you feel you could remain upright forever!

That is not, however where you want to be. The excitement of skiing is outside the smooth. The excitement is on the waves where you can jump and catch some air and increase your speed! When He

said, Come, that is what Jesus called Peter into. Peter stepped into the wind and the waves and for a moment, he walked on the water by himself. See, for just a moment, Peter still believed he could do church by himself. He believed he and the other members, the other disciples were capable of ministry without the full presence of God. He stepped out and for an instant he was convinced he was right. Then he became frightened by the wind and the waves and he began to sink. The thing he remembered this time however was that he was not alone. Jesus was there! Jesus would hear his cry!

We have been taught since we were children in Sunday School that Peter cried out in panic. What if, instead we imagine Peter calling out in confidence. What if we imagine Peter knowing Jesus would hear his cry and save him. How does that help us imagine our role as the church, our place in the world? If we know we can count on God to be beside us in those moments we become overwhelmed with the ministry in front of us can we function in that ministry with more confidence, can we forget about our own needs our own lives, our own petty issues and concentrate on loving our neighbor?

In that instant when Peter began to sink, he called out just as the church should have been calling out all along. When the church was beaten and battered by the winds of the world, the church should have been turning not toward the world and the worldly issues of pettiness but toward God, the one who rescued them from slavery in Egypt, the One who returned them from Babylon, the one who raised Jesus from the dead. This One is always trustworthy! This One is always true! When we call on His name, immediately he reaches down to rescue us!

Notice one final thing about Jesus in the rescue this morning. Again, since childhood we have learned that the tone in Jesus voice was one of criticism of Peter. What if, this morning, in this moment we imagine the tone as one of hope. What if we imagine Jesus saying, you can do it Peter, it just takes a little more practice, a little more faith, a little more willingness to put the church out on the waves and recognize that the beating and the battering is the way of the world but you can withstand because I am with you always, even to the end of the age. (Matt. 28)

Because we live in the world we become so callused to the words of the world that we think everyone, even God speaks to us critically. What if we can re-imagine this story as a story of encouragement to the church. What if we can remember in this story the original purpose God has in redeeming His chosen people from Egypt; so that they might worship Him! What if we can remember in this story that God wants God's church to call on him, to confess in worship that Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again! How different might our lives as the church be if we can remember this? "Happy are the feet of those who bring good news!"

When Peter called out to Jesus, "He said, 'Come!'" What if we can remember that Jesus never calls us to come without Him. If he calls us, we can trust that He will be there. If he calls us to face the storms of the world, it is because He is in the world working to invite others to "Come, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near!" If he calls, His hand will be there to rescue us and to save us not because of our power but because of His. He said, Come! Amen!