

Message for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A (8/9/2020)
Romans 10:5-15
Matthew 14:22-33

I've never thought of our Gospel today as a story about prayer, but this time through it's all I can see. You may have noticed that this episode begins with Jesus praying on the mountain alone. In fact, this is the first reference in the Gospel of Matthew to Jesus himself at prayer. But, there are three more prayers in this story, two by Peter and one by all the disciples. And, each of the four prayers reveals something significant about the life of faith, and about the God to whom we pray, the God we've come to know and trust in Christ.

It's notable, first of all, that Jesus makes a point to carve out a time and space for prayer. Upon hearing the news of John the Baptizer's death, he had hoped to retreat across the sea by himself, but was met on the shore by the crowds who sought him everywhere he went. No minutes to rest, no moment to pray,¹ only needs to meet. "And he had compassion for [the people]...."² Having completed his work of healing and feeding, Jesus insists on a reprieve the second time, dismissing the crowds and sending the disciples away in the boat. Finally, he's alone; finally, he's free to center himself and be revitalized for the ongoing work of God's reign. So, he climbs the mountain, that proven place of communion with God, and stays there a while.

¹ "Maria," *Rage Against the Machine*.

² Matthew 14:14.

Whereas the three remaining prayers in the story take place during or after the impending storm, Jesus prays before the storm. That is to say, he models prayerfulness in general, a steady orientation toward God throughout life's triumphs and trials. This kind of prayer is a discipline; it's proactive, so it primes Jesus for the critical moment. **Since God is his still center in the quiet and calm, in other words, Jesus can be a still center for his disciples in the wind and waves.**³

Peter utters the second prayer in the story, but only after the disciples have struggled against the wind for some time, recoiled in fear from the figure of Jesus approaching them on the water, and heard his reassuring word through the gale: "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Only God walks on the sea; everyone knows that.⁴ Yet, even as Jesus speaks and acts with divine authority, it's not enough for Peter. Peter indulges the human desire to know fully, to experience God's presence in his body, to have every doubt erased: "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Who among us hasn't put God to the test with similar petitions? ***God, if you're real, give me a sign I can't miss. God, if you love me, make me feel it. God, if you really intend to care for me, when I take a risk, prove it.***

Of course, Peter's test fails because it's administered on his terms and according to his shaky faith. He trusts the sea to swallow him more than he trusts Jesus to uphold him, so he begins to sink. And, it's at this point that he

³ Sue Hudacek, Preaching Peace table, Tacoma, WA, 8/4/2020.

⁴ M. Eugene Boring, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VIII, 328.

prays the third prayer in the story, the shortest and most poignant of them all:

“Lord, save me!” It’s an echo of every desperate cry to God through the ages, every pained supplication, every last hope. And, as such, it’s also a deeply human prayer. **What is faith, after all, but a persistent plea to God to rescue us from our storms?** Despite our self-assurance, humankind has learned over and over again that we are not the masters of our destiny. We’re at the mercy of the seas of chaos, both the chaos we create and that which is beyond our control. And, if we can’t save ourselves, then **we need a savior, one to speak peace to us and embrace us with steadfast love, one to extend a hand to us in our fear – to reach down even into the grave – and pull us up.** “Save us from the time of trial,”⁵ Jesus teaches us to pray, so we pray like Peter, and cling to the promise that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”⁶

The wind doesn’t die down until after Jesus has caught Peter and they’ve both boarded the boat again. This means that all the struggle, all the uncertainty, all the testing, even Peter’s rescue takes place while the storm is raging. Still, the wind eventually ceases, and the return to quiet and calm prompts the disciples to pray the last prayer in the story: “Truly you are the Son of God.” **It’s a doxology of sorts, a song of praise acknowledging that Jesus somehow fulfills God’s purpose to bring peace and life to a battered and fearful world.**

⁵ Matthew 6:13.

⁶ Romans 10:13.

God doesn't promise to bring our trials to an immediate end, even if that's what we'd prefer. But, the God we've come to know in Christ is a God of hope, a God of resurrection. And, to borrow the words of Frederick Buechner, "Resurrection means that the worst thing is never the last thing."

Friends, when the wind is against us, we look and listen for Christ's abiding presence in the chaos. *Take heart*, he calls, *I'm with you; don't be afraid*. And, **when we perceive him, we sense the will of God to uphold us even in the worst of times, and ultimately to still all our storms**. This trust, the gift of God to embolden our hearts, is what inspires our own song of praise: "Lord, when the tempest rages, I need not fear; for you, the Rock of Ages, are always near. Close by your side abiding, I fear no foe, for when your hand is guiding, in peace I go."⁷

⁷ Julie von Hausmann, "Lord, Take My Hand and Lead Me," *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* #767.