

Proper 14A
The Rev. Dr. William Seth Adams
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Matthew 14.22-33

Blessed be the Name of God

Telling stories. It's a very common social activity. Doubtless this morning's story about the wind and the water must have been told over and over for a long time before it was written down. And no wonder. It's a good story, surprising, engaging. But still, you can't help wondering just what it was that caught people's attention. In a world where everything was recalled and recounted by memory, there must have been an awful lot to remember and lots and lots of stories, even stories as extravagant as this one.

Amongst the followers of Jesus, regarding this particular story, who remembered what and why? Well, let's see.

Firstly, there would obviously be one group of storytellers who would value very highly, the deep inner spirit of Jesus. They would fasten very quickly on the beginning of our story where the Evangelist tells us that Jesus "went up the mountain by himself to pray." This is the same spirit that is so evident in the account of Jesus' prayer to his Father recounted in John 17. In that long prayer, Jesus prays over and over that his followers might experience the oneness he knows with his Father. He prayed that they—his followers--might be one, as Jesus and his Father were one. In a variety of ways, this was Jesus' plea, exposing the true heart of Our Lord. That same sense is evident here as our story begins and, for that matter, as last week's story also began. Today, after he dismissed the crowd and got his disciples into a boat to go ahead of him, then, "he went up the mountain by himself to pray."

There have been those among us, from the very beginning, who would take this short and clear verse, and others like it, as a directive for their own lives. They would see this modest activity as descriptive of the deepest facet of Jesus' spiritual make-up. He would go to a quiet place, mountain or desert, and there alone, he would pray.

The tradition that would become Christian monasticism would take this kind of verse as an invitation or even a directive for imitation. The imitation of Christ would

include this holy practice, retiring to a quiet place, alone, to pray. Surely, then, this is a very good reason to remember this story.

A second group might very well have fastened on the high drama of the disciples tossing and turning at the hands of a violent storm, “battered by the waves...far from the land, for the wind was against them.” The story makes it clear that this battering was relentless throughout the whole torturous night.

This group of storytellers would have a mix of interests. Some, of course, would be thrill seekers, people for whom the excitement of the storm would remind them of their own adventures on the sea, many of them being fisherfolk, after all. They would retell the tumult of the wind and sea as akin and analogous to their own experiences, threatening as the wind and sea might well have been for them as well.

Others in this group would have a less wholesome intent. These are the sort who liked to remember and recount the shortcomings of Jesus’ closest followers, people whose own jealousy, perhaps, would lead them to ridicule the shallowness of faith of this inner circle, their lack of understanding and weakness in the face of peril. They might also retell this story because the disciples foolishly thought that Jesus was a ghost, as he approached them out of the fog. They’d tell this story to poke fun at the foolishness of the disciples, a ghost, indeed.

There would certainly be those who simply lived to recount the extraordinary, mind-blowing feats of Jesus. These are the folks who would remember and recount the miraculous feedings, the withering of the fig tree, the healing of Jairus’ daughter and the healing of the woman with the frightful flow of blood. For this group of storytellers, having Jesus walk on water would be a tale worth spinning over and over again. “I’m with him,” they’d say, “I’m with the chap who walks on water.” It would be quite a credential!

Then there would be those, perhaps the largest contingent in this group, those who yearned to hear over and over again, what Jesus told the people in the boat. When Jesus saw the fear of his followers in the boat, he said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

There are many people, I would count myself amongst this number, who need to hear these comfortable words often, perhaps especially now. The complexities of life sometimes threaten more than others and in those threatening times, these threatening

times, these words of reassurance are fundamental and necessary. “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

Indeed, when it seems that the world is falling apart, I need these words all the more. Famine in Somalia, deadly heat in parts of the US and Canada, war in countless places, our political and financial situation in what could prove to be a horrendous mess, and on and on—these words of reassurance are rich with meaning and power. If for no other reason, at the moment, we’d retell this story so as to hear these words, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

Next in our explorations we’d come to the people who would be particularly alert to the activities of Peter. Several weeks from now, we will hear Jesus tell Peter that he, Peter, is the rock upon which Jesus intends to build. Clearly, Peter was a player!

There would be two sorts of folks whose interest in Peter would stir their memories and spark their storytelling.

The first group, of course, would be Peter’s enthusiasts, those who might have known of the rich and supple leadership that Peter was to exercise after the death and rising of Jesus. It would be Peter, above all the others in this small inner circle, who would step forward to defend and lead the infant Church. It would be Peter, along with his not so companionable companion, Paul, who would get the Church on its feet and moving.

Some of the folks, then, who would want to tell this story, would be fans of Peter. They would applaud his boldness in stepping out of the boat, doing what he was commanded to do. After all, to Peter, Jesus said directly, “Come,” and as faithful as ever, Peter stepped out.

Now the other people who would want to tell and retell these events, mindful of Peter’s role in the story, would be the folks who saw Peter as the leader of the Keystone Cops. These folks would have savored this story not because Peter stepped out as he was commanded, but because when he stepped out, commanded or not, very soon, he sank. “That’s our man Peter,” they’d say. They would relish what Jesus said to Peter, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

Peter’s detractors, of course, would say that he doubted because he couldn’t help it. That’s how he really was. These folks would likely know that not so long from now,

Peter would deny Jesus three times and in so doing, Peter would show his true colors, they would say! Even though Jesus would forgive Peter three times, in the view of Peter's detractors, the stain on Peter would not be removed.

Some of the storytellers would laud Peter for his bravery and other would chide Peter for his weakness. In either case, they'd both want to tell and retell the story.

It's likely that all these groups, whatever else was true for them, would elevate the last of the story to a place of honor, above any other reason to tell and retell the story. It is here that the tyrannical wind is calmed and Jesus' companions in the boat once again, but not yet finally, know who he is. "Truly you are the Son of God."

The contemporary poet, Mary Oliver, writing about this story, has said,

Sweet Jesus, talking
His melancholy madness,
Stood up in the boat
And the sea lay down,
Silky and sorry.
So everybody was saved
That night.

Our forbears, the earliest of storytellers, the ones who best remember the many details, remember even perhaps Jesus himself, these folks would all want us to know the punch line, the resolution of the story. They would want us to know and take completely to heart, their testimony about who this Jesus was and is. Again Mary Oliver, speaking of our Jesus, describes him in that transformative moment as "tender and luminous and demanding as he always was." ["Maybe," *New and Collected Poems*, 1992.]

This is the One given to us by God, upon whom we depend. The One who gives us direction and in our failings, forgives us while chiding us onward. He is remembered by many and his deeds are told and retold by generations and generations of faithful people, and for a remarkable mixture of reasons. But in the final analysis, the remembering is only part of it.

The stories are told and our remembrance is stimulated and encouraged not so we will be familiar with the past but so we can live our way into the future. We remember this Jesus so as to recognize him now, today, to recognize him in the faces of those we love, to recognize him in the faces of strangers, to recognize him in the faces of the poor

and the disenfranchised, to recognize him in the joys and sorrows that constitute human life and society. If I did not know the stories, I would not recognize him amongst you, and surely I do.

We remember so as to know right now the presence of the One whom God gave to us, and not just to us, but also to the whole world. That's why we remember.

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