MATTHEW 14:22-33: 13/8/23

Sermon videolink: <https://youtu.be/jUmw9yq4Yng>

Today we hear that once again the disciples are in a boat in rough seas. In chapter 8 of Matthew (vs 23-27) they were also in a boat in rough seas, but Jesus was with them. This time Jesus is back on land on a mountainside praying. It is night time, shortly before dawn and the boat is being buffeted by waves as they try to cross the lake against the wind.

The evening before had been the end of another very interesting day with Jesus. He had preached for hours to a crowd of thousands. Then instead of sending them off to get food, he fed them with 5 loaves and two fish. Over 5000 thousand men as well as a good number of women and children.

These men had been disciples of Jesus for a while now. They were still trying to work out exactly who Jesus was. On the one hand, he was an ordinary man who wouldn’t stand out in a crowd. At least not until he started speaking. When he started speaking people paid attention. When Jesus spoke people’s hearts burned inside of them and they wanted to hear more and more. Then there were the miracles not only feeding large crowds with next to no food, but healing people from disease, lifelong disabilities, and spiritual oppression.

In the last storm when Jesus was in the boat with them, he had stilled the storm. Full of amazement they all agreed, “What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!” If only Jesus was with them this time.

For people steeped in the Old Testament, as all the disciples were, rough and stormy seas at night most likely brought to the front of their minds the chaos of the deep in the beginning, when the Spirit of God was on the face of the waters. It would also have reminded them of the monsters in the sea such as the leviathan, waiting to swallow them boat and all. Several of them were fishermen and they knew how dangerous the water could be, all of them probably knew of a friend, a fellow fisherman or even a family member who had been taken by the water. If they weren’t already full of fear, they soon would be.

Have you ever experienced fear? Fear is a good thing because it is the body's way of warning us of an impending threat. It gets us ready to either run away or to defend ourselves. Sometimes when you can’t run away and you can’t fight, fear can cause you to freeze. One of the key things about fear is that it is difficult if not impossible to control.

Suddenly they see someone walking on the lake in the dim pre-dawn light and they are terrified. They think it is an apparition or ghost, a phantom. A phantom, in the middle of a stormy sea can only mean one thing. The phantom is a sign that things are about to get far worse. Death has come to take them and soon Leviathan will snack on them. They are terrified. The word that is used in the text suggests that there was a great commotion going on inside each of the disciples. We might call it restlessness, being stirred up inside, being anxious or distressed.

As the waves battered the boat and the spectre of death approached, suddenly the ghost spoke. “Take courage!” “Take courage!” “I AM!”… “Don’t be afraid.”

You could imagine what is going through the minds of the twelve on the boat. Twelve people who have been raised going to Synagogue every week hearing lessons read and taught from the Hebrew Scriptures. “I AM” That’s what God had said to Moses from the burning bush when Moses asked for God’s name. “I AM WHO I AM.” The same “I AM”, who in the beginning created the heavens and the earth, and whose Spirit was moving over the face of the chaotic waters.

This ghost, this phantom is their teacher. He has come down from the mountain like Moses after praying and talking to God the Father and now he is approaching them as he moves over the face of the water. Yet this is more than a human being, this is the great “I AM”, who tamed the waters at the beginning of creation. They weren’t alone, Jesus was with them and that meant God was with them.

Surely, they would remember this moment for the rest of their lives. They would tell people about it, repeating it again and again, because it made a difference to how they lived their lives. It made a difference to how the people they told lived their lives.

People it seems are afraid of so many things in this life. The fear of failing, the fear of losing your job or your possessions, the fear of your marriage, or an important friendship falling apart. For some the constant fear of not being loved and not being worth anything. The fear of being mistreated, and abused. For others the fear of becoming sick and not recovering, and for many the fear of growing old and your time running out. The fear of losing someone through death or the fear of losing everyone through their own death.

Everyone experiences fear but the disciples in the boat knew something. Even though life is full of fearful things you are not alone. Even in the worst most fear-filled situation, when the future and even your life are at stake, God is there with you. The great I AM is with you.

Jesus is close enough to recognise now, they have heard him speak and they know it is him. Peter says, *“Lord, if it’s you,..tell me to come to you on the water”* (vs 28). Jesus says, “Come”, and Peter leaps before he looks, off the boat into the storm, and he lands… but not in the water. Peter lands on the water, walking toward “I AM.” For a moment in the presence of Jesus, Peter is fearless as he fixes his eyes on Jesus.

No sooner had Peter begun walking, than he looked around and realised where he was. That old familiar fear swept over him, and he started sinking, dropping like a stone into the water. He blurted out, “Lord, save me!” The great I AM, the teacher, Jesus, grabs Peter and catches him. They both get in the boat and the wind dies down.

The disciples have been trying to work out who Jesus is and now at last they come to a realisation. Jesus is far more than a mere human being, more than a teacher, he is also the Son of God.

We too have encountered him. You met him at your Baptism when you went down into the water. Your old self was drowned, and Jesus pulled you out of the water into a new life with him. You too can rest assured that no matter what life throws at you and no matter how full of fear you are, Jesus the Son of God will be with you always, and whenever you call out, “Lord save me”, he will reach out his hand and catch you.

Amen.

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