

“Take Heart, Calm Down, Cheer Up”

Matthew 14:22-33

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Today’s scripture reveals how to live in the dark, parched, difficult times of the soul. How to journey through the 3 a.m. tossing and turning of a sleepless night.

We begin by taking care of ourselves when things are going well for us. Jesus has just fed around 15,000 people with 2 loaves of bread and 5 fish. That is a productive day, so Jesus relaxes and prays.

Matthew 14:22-23(NLT) “Immediately after this, Jesus insisted that his disciples get back into the boat and cross to the other side of the lake, while Jesus sent the people home. After sending them home, Jesus went up into the hills by himself to pray. Night fell while he was there alone.”

Jesus turned off his cell phone, relaxed, celebrated and renewed himself. Donald Armentrout wrote. “Many times our Lord slipped away to have quiet time for himself away from his disciples and away from the crowds that wanted and needed his attention. Jesus made a habit of doing this, even to the point that the Scriptures state that the disciples often did not know exactly where their master was in their times of need. But Jesus did this intentionally; because, Jesus knew that he, too, needed to be ‘recreated’ as he prayed and took time alone to restore his soul. We need to take the time to refresh ourselves. We were not made to continuously work and push and make things happen without taking down times to rest, relax, and spend time with God. Each of us needs to find that one way of doing so, be it vacationing with the family, digging in the dirt, taking some moments of quiet early in the morning or in the evening, or sitting alone in the backyard taking in the beauty of God’s wonderful creation. When we do this, we are taking care of part of God’s creation, namely ourselves. This brings glory to God.”

Celebrating our accomplishments, being grateful, renewing ourselves, savoring joy and resting is a great way to pray. Enjoying the high notes of the unforced rhythms of grace gives us the perseverance to endure the low notes.

Matthew 14:24-26 “Meanwhile, the disciples were in trouble far away from land, for a strong wind had risen, and they were fighting heavy waves. About three o’clock in the morning Jesus came toward them, walking on the water. When the disciples saw him walking on the water, they were terrified. In their fear, they cried out, “It’s a ghost!”

This scripture describes at least three struggles: Humanity against nature, faith against fear, and the broken person we are today against the glorious person we are becoming.

Years ago on a backpacking trip I read a sign as the trail began to ascend up and over Mount Washington. “Warning: You are hiking into the most extreme weather on earth. Be prepared for high winds, sudden temperature shifts, and every kind of precipitation. The Mountain does not care about you.” Nature is created order unable to feel. A hurricane does not have feelings to maneuver around someone who chose to build their house on a beach. The rain

does not have compassion on someone who bought a house or built a church in the swamp we now call North St Paul. Cancer does not care about your situation. Jesus assures us that natural disasters will strike all of us. We are to build our lives on God the rock; because when the storms come, not if but when, we can endure. Nature just does its thing. Nature follows order. When nature destroys our stuff or us, we should not take it personally. Contrary to the insurance clause it is not an act of God. The natural world is not opposed to us or in favor of us for it does not think or feel.

Nature, disease, does not care but Jesus does care. Jesus is with us. God will save us. It is highly unlikely that God will interfere with the laws of nature; rather, God either gets us through or resurrects us to eternal life where there are no storms, no disease, no struggle, no tears.

Dawn Mayes writes. "Even when we are doing God's will, storms of life will come. A popular Christian myth is that, if we are doing what God wants, God will make everything smooth sailing. No sorrow, no suffering, not even minor inconveniences will trouble us as long as we are living the right way! No where does God promise if we obey God, our jobs will go well. Our family life will be great. We'll enjoy good health. The traffic lights will all be green, and we'll always find the closest parking place at the grocery store."

The other half of that teaching is also untrue. What does it mean when things don't go our way? It does not mean we are not living right! An illness, a loss, a tragedy, is not God testing us or punishing us for wrongdoing. Equating doing God's will with an easy life is not based in scripture and is not verified by the lives of people of faith.

The disciples are in the boat in the storm in the middle of the night because Jesus told them to go there. The fact that they are there in obedience to Jesus does not spare them from the adversity of the storm.

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Noble Prize winner Wislawa Szymborska wrote. "The hour between night and day. The hour between toss and turn. No one feels fine at 3 a.m." When have you felt in the dark, far from shore, battered by a storm, afraid, exhausted longing for safety and rest? In the dark you cannot see things for what they are, suddenly everything is threatening. Awake, tossing and turning, trying to sleep at 3 a.m. your mistakes rise up and point fingers of accusation. You should have done better. You remember the letter you meant to write, the phone call never made. You remember things you said—you could bite your tongue. You remember things people said to you as if the wounds were still fresh. There is little forgiveness at 3 a.m. Chaos reigns at 3 a.m. God is with us yet we cannot recognize God in that weary state, so we mistake God for a ghost. We wonder is this loving eternal God who resurrects all really true or is it an illusion.

Matthew 14:27-33 "But Jesus spoke to them at once. "Don't be afraid," he said. "Take courage. I am here!" Then Peter called to him, "Lord, if it's really you, tell me to come to you, walking on the water." "Yes, come," Jesus said. So Peter went over the side of

the boat and walked on the water toward Jesus. But when he saw the strong wind and the waves, he was terrified and began to sink. “Save me, Lord!” he shouted. Jesus immediately reached out and grabbed him. “You have little faith,” Jesus said. “Why did you doubt me?” When they climbed back into the boat, the wind stopped. Then the disciples worshiped Jesus. “You really are the Son of God!” they exclaimed.

Sometimes I have heard Jesus words to Peter, “You have little faith” read with a criticizing, or disappointed tone which does not fit the way Jesus treated anyone seeking Jesus in the Bible or us. Jesus responds with compassion. The context indicates that Jesus said, “You have little faith” with an affirming tone of excitement for Peter’s little faith. Jesus has just fed a multitude with a little food. Soon Jesus will tell parables of the Kingdom of God, a little seed becomes a great tree, a little yeast makes delicious bread. A little faith enables Peter to walk on water for a moment, a little faith is growing Peter into the rock upon which the church will be built. Jesus is praising Peter for his little faith, his courage, and his desire to fight through the fear and take the next step.

Laurence DeWolfe writes. “Peter is the representative for you and me. He steps out, betting that Jesus is really there with him. He is not sure of what he can see, any more than you and I can be certain Jesus is with us. Peter is certain there is water all around him, the wind is still blowing hard, and he has left the relative safety of the boat. He can see and feel all of that. Suddenly, he is not so sure of Jesus. “Doubt” here isn’t an intellectual reservation about Jesus’ ability to rescue Peter. It is double-mindedness, split focus. Jesus wants to know why Peter looked away. Why did Peter consider any possibility other than his safety with Jesus?”

This is a story about us in liminal space. Richard Rohr describes liminal space as: a unique spiritual position where human beings hate to be, but where God is always leading us. It is when we have left the “tried and true” but have not yet been able to replace it with anything else. It is when we are finally out of the way. In liminal space, we do not yet know where to look. Should we strain our eyes to get a clearer view of what we can only trust is before us? Dare we risk looking away from what is around us that we can easily see and understand? It is hard not to doubt and be afraid when we are in-between. Liminal space is often associated with rituals of passage. Sacred moments of transition require big steps toward a new way that is not yet clear and not without risk. We enter liminal space when we take a step without knowing quite what the next step will be. Some of us dare to step out in faith, take big risks, change the course of our lives. Others are thrust into liminal space by forces beyond their control, such as a diagnosis, an injury, a storm, a death. Some are wondering what they have done. All they know is that the boat is drifting away behind them, the waves are all around them, and Jesus still seems far away. We are in liminal space when we are not sure we believe everything we have been told. When we have many questions we are afraid to ask. When we want to renew our grounding in faith, but we are overwhelmed with options. When we know we need something but not yet sure what that something will be. In the in-between, do we have any faith at all?”

Liminal space is scary, but full of potential. It deepens our love enabling us to love outside the lines. It reveals a whole another world outside the box. It gives us visions of other

dimensions. Jesus welcomes Peter when he dares to step out of the boat. Jesus saves Peter when he loses focus on what is ahead of him and gets lost in what he knows is around him. When you are in liminal space, muster up your faith and take a bold step into the unknown. The worst that can happen is Jesus will save you; however, you may do the spectacular like walking on water.

It is natural for us to have a mixture of faith and doubt, feats and failures. Even vibrant Christians doubt and fear. Being a disciple means that, despite our feelings, we will trust and follow anyway. Peter took a risk in attempting to walk out to Jesus; and in doing so, he came to a fuller understanding of God's transformational power. Jesus will always reach out and save us in our times of need. Even when our faith fails, Jesus will still lift us to safety.

Even the disciples who were paralyzed by fear, whimpering in the bottom of the boat, unable to take the next step, were delivered to a state where they could see God and worship. Our experience leads us to expect certain outcomes; yet, God is loving everything and everyone into goodness. Often we do not recognize God or what God is doing. God works in ordinary and mysterious ways. Through the darkness, on the other side of the storm, is the glorious person we are becoming.

Celebrate, rest, and be grateful when things are going well. When your mind is racing at 3 a.m., know that all will be glorious, no matter what happens, or what you do, or fail to do. When the storms come, try to muster the faith to take the next step. If you're unable take heart, fear not, calm down, God is with you and will save you. Jesus is saying to you, "Take heart, fear not, calm down and cheer up." Amen