

Isaiah 43:1-13

Matthew 14:22-33

August 9, 2020

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

HAVE A HEART

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

In The Wizard of Oz, after Dorothy and the Scarecrow oil the Tin Man and get him moving again, the Tin Man dances and sings:

When a man's an empty kettle
He should be on his mettle
And yet I'm torn apart
Just because I'm presumin'
That I could be kinda human
If I only had a heart
I'd be tender, I'd be gentle
And awful sentimental
Regarding love and art
I'd be friends with the sparrows
And the boy that shoots the arrows
If I only had a heart
Picture me a balcony
Above a voice sings low
Wherefore art thou, Romeo?
I hear a beat, how sweet!
Just to register emotion, jealousy, devotion
And really feel the part
I could stay young and chipper
And I'd lock it with a zipper
If I only had a heart

The Tin Man knows how important it is to have a heart. He says, "You people with hearts have something to guide you, and need never do wrong; but I have no heart, and so I must be very careful."

And then there is the Cowardly Lion who sings:
Courage! What makes a king out of a slave?
Courage! What makes the flag on the mast to wave?
Courage! What makes the elephant charge his tusk,
in the misty mist or the dusky dusk?
What makes the muskrat guard his musk?
Courage! What makes the sphinx the seventh wonder?
Courage! What makes the dawn come up like thunder?

Courage! What makes the Hottentot so hot?
What put the “ape” in apricot?
What have they got that I ain’t got?
Courage!

In the Emerald City, the Wizard of Oz tells the Cowardly Lion, “You have plenty of courage, I am sure. All you need is confidence in yourself. There is no living thing that is not afraid when it faces danger. The true courage is in facing danger when you are afraid, and that kind of courage you have in plenty.”

“Heart” and “Courage” — pun intended, these ideas are at the “heart” of today’s story about the disciples in the boat on the wind-tossed sea and Jesus and Peter walking on the water. There’s a lot of fear in this story. The disciples were afraid — no, they were terrified! — when they saw a figure walking across the waves at 3 or 4 o’clock in the morning. Peter became frightened when he noticed the strong wind and began to sink. And, although some of the disciples were experienced fishermen on the Sea of Galilee and even though Matthew doesn’t come right out and say it, the disciples must have been scared when their boat was battered by the waves and the wind was against them.

“Heart” and “Courage” — that is Jesus’ answer to the disciples’ terror in the storm and, by extension, to Peter’s fear as he began to sink. Depending on which translation you are reading, you hear Jesus say to his frightened disciples: “Be of good cheer. Trust. Calm down. Have courage. Take heart. Be of good courage.”

In her online article called “When We Can’t Walk on Water,” Karoline Lewis writes, “The root meaning of the English word ‘courage’ is the Latin ‘cor’ and the French ‘coeur’ — ‘heart,’ which may explain English translations that vary between ‘take heart’ and ‘take courage.’ What is Jesus saying to Peter, to his disciples? I wonder if Jesus is saying to them, to us, faith means living out of your heart. You are going to have to lead, live, and love with your heart, Peter. You know who I am. Deep down in your heart, you know me and you know I will be there. Trust yourself. Trust your heart.”¹

Notice that Jesus didn’t calm the wind and the waves to answer the disciples’ terror. The wind ceased after the fact, once he and Peter had gotten back in the boat. Instead, Jesus’ answer was three-part: “Courage! Take heart!” “I am.” “Don’t be afraid.” In other words, Jesus calls the disciples to put their trust in him *in the middle of the storm*.

In the same way, Jesus answers Peter’s request — “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water” — with the simple invitation, “Come!” When Peter stepped out of the boat and started walking on the water, it wasn’t slick as glass, peaceful and calm. There is no indication in the story that the sea had quieted down, so we can assume the boat and Peter himself were still being battered by the waves and the strong wind was blowing.

In one of his sermons called “How You Will Know If It’s Jesus,” William Willimon talks about Jesus approaching the disciples on the choppy waves in the mid-

dle of the night. He writes, “And that’s how you will know Jesus. Jesus is the one who extravagantly, recklessly, commands you to leave the safety of the boat, to step into the sea, to test the waters, and show what your faith is made of. That’s Jesus. ‘Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling, calling for you and for me,’ goes an old gospel song. Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling you in today’s scripture to risk your life, to throw caution to the wind, to step out of the boat and defy death. ‘Jesus calls us o’er the tumult of our life’s wild, restless sea, in our joys and in our sorrows, “Christian come and follow me.”’ Isn’t that how another old gospel hymn puts it? But in today’s Gospel, Jesus doesn’t simply call us over the tumult. Jesus doesn’t call us out of the tumult. No, in today’s Gospel, Jesus calls Peter into the tumult. Jesus calls Peter out of the boat and on to the waves. And Peter, on the basis of all his past experiences with Jesus, calls out, ‘Lord, if it is you, command me to walk on the waves.’”²

How appropriate and timely it is for us to hear this story about courage and heart in the midst of the storm, less than a week since Hurricane Isaias came ashore in Brunswick County. We are thankful here in Duplin County that the storm didn’t cause more damage, but strong winds and crashing waves were certainly on everyone’s minds a week ago. The Weather Channel and Wilmington TV stations were reporting on increasing wind speeds and the dangerous storm surge. We heard reports of wind speeds recorded on buoys out in the Atlantic offshore of Wilmington. And, even if Isaias blew through here very quickly, the storm’s impending arrival and visit during the night Monday/Tuesday disrupted lives all up and down the Eastern U.S. seaboard, some more than others.

With memories of Isaias fresh in our minds, it is that much easier to relate to “the storms of life” that confront us. Listen to how the psalmist cried out to God for deliverance in tough times:

*Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck.
I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold;
I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me.
I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched.
My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God. (Psalm 69:1-3)*

I don’t think the person who wrote those words was literally in the same situation as Peter who was frightened and began to sink when he took his eyes off of Jesus and noticed the strong wind. But the emotions and sentiments of the psalmist and Peter are the same — “Save me, O God! Lord, save me!”

A little less than two years ago, folks in our congregation and community were “up to their necks and sinking in deep mire where there is no foothold” in the floodwaters of Hurricane Florence. Now, in this season, we are straining against the oars in the midst of the chaotic storm of Covid-19 and all of its implications in and for our lives. The waves are battering our boats and the winds are against them. And we are afraid!

This past Monday I began a 5-week online course through Columbia Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia called “Call to the Center: A Contemplative

Prayer Experience.” To begin this week, we had to post our thoughts about three questions. The first question asked us to “name your intentions for this class.” I share these very personal thoughts with all of you. I wrote, “During the first week of this class on Call to the Center, the following things have happened: three beloved friends in the congregation have died in nine days and I have had to conduct two funerals under Covid-19 restrictions; our HVAC system died at our house and we went a week without AC when the daily temperatures were in the upper 90’s; Hurricane Isaias came right over the top of our community (fortunately we didn’t sustain much damage, but did lose power for 13 hours);

I am working with our elders to figure out how to re-enter the sanctuary for in-person worship on September 6 for the first time since March 8. Ironically, at a time when I most need to be practicing centering prayer and listening for God’s Word, I am pulled in so many different directions and am feeling very stressed!”

When I think about everything facing us these days, I feel like Peter who “when he noticed the strong wind, became frightened, and beginning to sink, cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’” Thank God Jesus didn’t say to Peter, “Tough luck, buddy! You thought you could walk on water, and look at the mess you’re in now! Good luck!” No, instead, “Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught Peter and said, ‘You of little faith, why did you doubt?’”

“Why did you doubt?” We don’t know how or if Peter answered Jesus’ question. But what about you and me? How will we answer Jesus’ question — “Why did you doubt?” After all, Jesus has already assured us, “Courage! Take heart! It is I. Don’t be afraid.” Maybe it’s because we’re in exactly the same spot Peter found himself in — not literally sinking in the sea, but overwhelmed by the buffeting winds and the crashing waves or, as someone has put it, “midway between faith and doubt, in the struggle between faith and fear.”

On the day I wrote this sermon, I saw a post on Facebook from my good friend, Dr. James Page, pastor of Adoram Baptist Church here in Wallace. James posted, “When God measures a person, he puts the tape around the heart, not the head.” Courage! Take heart! Have a heart for Jesus! When we depend on ourselves, we inevitably start noticing the strong winds and the crashing waves, and we begin to sink. But Jesus calls us *through* the tumult of our life’s wild, restless seas, saying, “Christian, follow me, trust me, I am right here with you, don’t be afraid.”

Here is a song called “Oceans” by Joel Houston, Matt Crocker, and Salomon Lighthelm. As we try to walk toward and with Jesus through the raging winds and crashing waves of these days we are living in, perhaps the words will help us all have a heart for Jesus and keep our eyes on him.

*You call me out upon the waters
The great unknown where feet may fail
And there I find You in the mystery
In oceans deep my faith will stand*

*And I will call upon Your name
And keep my eyes above the waves
When oceans rise
My soul will rest in Your embrace
For I am Yours and You are mine
Your grace abounds in deepest waters
Your sovereign hand will be my guide
Where feet may fail and fear surrounds me
You've never failed and You won't start now*

*Spirit, lead me where my trust is without borders
Let me walk upon the waters
Wherever You would call me
Take me deeper than my feet could ever wander
And my faith will be made stronger
In the presence of my Savior³*

Let us pray: Lord, we come to you this day, seeking your healing and restoring love. Give us courage to reach out to you in the good and easy times as well as in the times of strain and stress. Open our hearts to receive your message of peace and hope. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

NOTES

¹Karoline Lewis, "When We Can't Walk on Water," Sunday, August 3, 2014, www.workingpreacher.org.

²William H. Willimon, "How You Will Know If It's Jesus," Sunday, August 7, 2005, at www.day1.org.

³"Oceans," by Joel Houston, Matt Crocker, Salomon Lighthelm, Hillsong Music Publishing, CCLI Song #6428767.