

Great Expectations

6 – Unbinding Your Heart

Proverbs 3:1-8

Matthew 14:22-33

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Fifth Sunday in Lent

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“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us.”

So Charles Dickens opens *A Tale of Two Cities* set in the time of the French Revolution, yet words applicable today as then, as it was in Jesus' day. In this wonderful rescue at sea when Jesus walking upon the sea demonstrates his true nature as Savior and Lord, welcomes a believing Peter, rescues a doubting Peter, and entering the boat, hand-in-hand with Peter, calms the storm. In short, it shows us, as he rides along in that boat with us, throughout whatever we face, the best of times, the worst of times, that we are held in his times. And with our eyes fixed on him, we can experience his fullness with us, here, now, always.

Our text in Matthew comes shortly after another dramatic miracle as Jesus has fed 5000 on the nearby mountain. Then too, the best of times, the worst of times. The time of lack, the time of abundance, the time of hunger, the time of satisfaction. After Jesus bids farewell to the crowd he goes up the mountain by himself to pray, having sent the disciples on ahead across the lake in their boat.

Over these six weeks leading up to Holy Week next Sunday, we have been on a great adventure, seeking God's presence and power in some fresh, creative and surprising ways. As we have focused on unbinding our hearts, we have been inviting God to come close and show us who he is and what he wants us to do. We have heard a number of incredible stories along this adventure, such as Laura Ray has shared with us this morning. Many more have been shared privately in small groups, and midweek prayer services, and in one-on-one conversations. We are finding that God is real and alive and at work, in this church and in our lives.

We are sensing a certain wave of momentum, the big MO that is catching us up in the winds of God, and discovering, as this story at sea shows us, the power of following Jesus as a disciple. Discipleship, is all about seeking Jesus, obeying him in what he shows us, sharing in the fullness of his life and ministry, and moving toward him confidently, even in the teeth of the storm.ⁱ

I

Throughout, we are experiencing **a new level of prayer**. The story begins with Jesus in prayer. Having completed one amazing ministry, feeding the 5000, he withdraws to the mountain for prayer with his heavenly Father. Prayer is so much more than a pro-forma ritual in worship, it is a way of life. Prayer only starts here. As we are in various classes and small groups, boards, staff and committee meetings, we are praying more. And I want to challenge us and encourage us to pray more and more, not only over these six weeks, but also over all our lives ahead. As I have said before, I am convinced the very survival and vibrancy of this congregation in this busy urban crossroads is the result of fervent ongoing prayer.

Part of the indirect message this story conveys is the importance of deep genuine prayer before undertaking a new venture. Notice the difference between Jesus who prays and the disciples who don't. As if to demonstrate the difference, Jesus sends them ahead alone without him, while he of necessity withdraws for prayer. If Jesus needed so much time alone in prayer, how much more do we?

Last Sunday many of you wrote down internal barriers keeping you, from encountering God as deeply and reaching as many people for God as we could. Very prominent among the internal barriers for many of you was time pressure, never enough time, always under the gun—too busy to pray.

II

Here, as the disciples jump into the boat and head out to sea, without prayer, without Jesus, they find themselves in a colossal mess. Chaos is king. In the Bible the sea is symbol of wild, untamed, dangerous, out-of-control existence. “By this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them.”

It is the worst of times for the disciples. Some of us are experiencing these worst of times right now; overwhelming burdens and responsibilities weigh us down, illness, fatigue, financial struggles, tense and broken relationships. Some times we feel we cannot go on and are about to be swamped by the waves and pulled under.

The daily news brings us story after story of chaos amid inevitable change; unprecedented budget challenges in this country, politicians playing fast and loose with the national budget, revolutions across the Middle East, tragedy in Japan. So much is unsettled; the waves are high, the winds are strong.

The psalmist writes,

“The clouds poured out water; the skies thundered; The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind; your lightnings lit up the world; the earthy trembled and shook,” (and yet,)
 “Your way was through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters; yet your footsteps were unseen.”ⁱⁱ

III

Suddenly in the midst of chaos – Christ, making his way through the sea. “Early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. They were terrified, crying, ‘It is a ghost!’ But immediately Jesus spoke to them, ‘Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.’ ” Strong words echoing throughout the gospels, “do not be afraid.” From his birth, to his resurrection, “do not be afraid.” We hear again and again. The assurance that fear is ended because he is with us. “It is I,” Ego Emi, echoing back to Moses at the burning bush, seeing the flame that is not consumed, hearing the voice, “I am that I am.” “I Am shall be with you.”

Jesus meets them at a time and in a way they least expect, walking across the waves. Here is no cheap magic trick, no rational explanation will suffice, none of those tree stumps just beneath the surface excuses. Here is Jesus showing who he is, King of Kings, Lord of Lords. He is God even as he is man. As such, He meets us in the midst of chaos and storm.

IV

Now Peter represents us, all people of faith, even people of a little bit of faith, as he says, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”ⁱⁱⁱ Don’t you just love Peter? He is like our impetuous mixed rat Terrier-Jack Russell, Humane Society survivor puppy dog Zoey, always wagging her tail, always eager to come at the slightest command, then running, running round the room in circles. Peter is eager to follow his Lord, and so comes up with this preposterous test, if it is you there bid me come. So Jesus says, “Ok Come”.

V

Demonstrating incredible trust, amazing faith, Peter steps out of the boat, one foot lightly skimming the water, then slowly, slowly shifting his weight, ever so slowly, it seems to be holding, until, his eyes on Jesus, the weight of his body shifts overboard. He is committed. He is on the water too, and it holds – his eye on Jesus he takes a step or two. He starts across the water, eyes on Jesus. But then he senses the wind, grasps the imminent danger, feels the wave lapping at his feet – things that distract him from the One whose voice he stepped out to obey. He looks away from Jesus, and begins to sink.

Faith and fear co-mingle. We do that. We place our weight on the Gospel. We trust God, we try something we sense he is calling us to undertake, and we make some progress. But then winds of opposition, waves of difficulty and doubt arise. Did God really say, “You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree in the Garden”? Then we start to go down. Fear takes over, and we think it is all over for us. That is the other overwhelming inner barrier you reflected in large numbers on your welcome cards you presented last Sunday. The major internal barriers for so many were time constraints and fear of being embarrassed if you tried to share your faith with someone.

Do you remember the climax of the movie, “Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade?” On his quest for the Holy Grail, to save his father who is dying, Indiana Jones has to pass through three supreme tests. The first test is **The Breath of God**. As he walks down a

corridor, Indiana has to bow down at precisely the correct moment to keep from having his head cut off by large revolving metal blades. He makes it through. The second test is **The Word of God**. He has to walk on exactly the right stones – the stones that spell God’s name in Latin – to keep from falling through the floor to his death. He makes it through this as well. But the third test, **The Path of God** is the most difficult. He comes to a chasm, 100 feet across and 1000 feet deep. On the other side is the doorway to the object of his longing, the Holy Grail. The instructions say, “Only in the leap from the lion’s head, will he prove his worth.”

Indiana says to himself, “It’s impossible. Nobody can jump this.” Then he realizes this test requires a leap of faith. His father had said, “You must believe, boy. You must believe.” So, with every nerve in his body warning “no”, he walks to the edge of the cliff... lifts his foot... then steps out into thin air – hoping that somehow he won’t end up like Wile E. Coyote in the “Roadrunner” cartoons. Sure enough – Indiana walks over on sheer air. He does not plummet to his death. He is upheld by an invisible force.”^{iv}

VI

Like Peter, (until Peter looked away, distracted by the waves and wind, calculating how impossible this all was, he would have begun to sink.) Yet, whether Peter was stepping out in bold faith, or crying out in terrifying fear, he was upheld. So long as his focus was on Jesus and not on the obstacle. In the words of an old Gospel hymn,

“Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful Face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
In the light of His glory and grace.”

“Lord, save me!” Peter cried. And “Jesus reached out his hand, caught him, saying, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” Here is a word to us, Church, people of faith. Not the outsiders who do not have faith, but the Church who has expressed faith, taken a step of faith, even a little step of faith, then doubts, but then cries out to Jesus.

As Jesus reaches out his hand, Peter is upheld. Then hand-in-hand, they get into the boat together, and instantly, the wind ceases. The storm calms. Life in the boat with Jesus is full of calm and peace and rest. And they all, Peter and the other disciples, respond by worshipping Jesus for who he is, God, who they will finally and fully know to be God and Lord and Savior, after he suffers a bitter death and his Father vindicates him with a glorious resurrection.

For now though, Jesus is in the boat with them, with us, his Church. This is where we are called to experience him, in the boat that is his body, the Church. From this place with him here with us, as we seek him through prayer, as we learn of him through scripture, as we keep our eyes fixed on him through faith, we will, like that early Church

in the Book of Acts, experience incredible transformation and power. Great grace will be upon us.

Peter asked Jesus to prove himself by calling him out onto the water, something Jesus probably never had in mind for Peter, but something Peter was able to do, as long as he had his eyes fixed on the goal, Jesus. But Jesus can most fully show himself to us as he is here with us in the boat. The ark, His Church, and as we then are continuing life together here as we sail through unpredictable waters, looking out for those who are not here, who also need to be in this boat, who need to experience the love of Jesus too.

Mother Teresa spoke to eager, upwardly mobile, elite graduates at Harvard University, during commencement in 1982, and the famous healer of the untouchables in Calcutta, India told a story about encountering a man sitting along the streets of London. He looked sad and lonely, she said.

“So I went right up to him. I took his hand and I shook it. He looked at me and said, ‘Oooh, after such a long time I feel the warmth of a human hand.’ This is what we have to find in this country and in all other countries around the world. And where do we begin? At home. And how do we begin to love? By prayer. Prayer always gives us a clean heart, and a clean heart can see God. And if we see God in each other, we will naturally love one another. We must help each other to pray.^v

Two things are necessary for Jesus to show up in the boat with us. First our lives have to be spiritually tended. We must be attentive to these disciplines we are growing in, of prayer and scripture and worship. Second, we must keep our eyes open. We must be looking for him and attentive to what God would have us do next.

What is God calling you to do? What is God calling us as a congregation to do? What sort of healing and help and hope are we called to extend? Who can we reach? Who are you being led to invite to come and find God in this place?

I want to challenge you to pray about this, and then I want to ask you to invite someone you think God is leading you to come and worship with us here on Easter Sunday. Do you know more people are receptive to coming to Church on Easter than on any other Sunday of the year? Who do you know that needs the healing and help and hope in their life that they can find through encountering the Risen Lord Jesus Christ here on Easter Sunday? Just think, their whole life could be changed, simply because you extend an invitation, a welcome, and then together we offer heartfelt grateful worship for all God is doing and has done in our lives.

In your bulletin you will find an invitation to give that person. First pray about who you should invite to church on Easter. Then hand-deliver this invitation. We have extras if you need more. But please invite at least one person. Follow it up with a phone

call, and an invitation to lunch at a restaurant or your home afterwards. I have Great Expectations – I believe God will guide you, fill the sails of your boat, and the sails of the boat of this congregation, and lead us where God needs us to be.

Grace be with us! Amen

ⁱ Thomas Long, Matthew, p.167

ⁱⁱ Psalm 77:17-19

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 14:28

^{iv} John Ortberg, If You Want To Walk On Water, You've Got To Get Out Of The Boat, , p.82

^v Mother Teresa, Finding God At Harvard – Spiritual Journeys of Thinking Christians, “A Hunger for God,” p.316