

Isaiah 43:1-7
Matthew 14:22-33

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Covenant Presbyterian Church

Covenant's Preaching Series
Simon Peter: Flawed Yet Faithful Disciple
Forecast: Scattered Storms
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My family's summer stomping grounds of the past 60 years or so is on the northern edge of Lake Huron, right next to the international waters which provide a border between the United States and Canada. Though many of you know what a good north wind can do to land and moorings on Lakes Mendota, Monona, or Waubesa, the wind and waves can really kick up on the Great Lakes. Gordon Lightfoot's song, "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald" is no exaggeration as it tells what can happen when the gales of November come early. Across a large body of water a storm can really wreak havoc. Each summer when my family first goes up to northern Michigan, we always survey the previous winter's moods as we look to see what trees have blown over, and how the docks have survived the drifting, and oftentimes pounding ice of a melting spring. And now that I'm able to spend much of the summer there, we usually witness firsthand a doozy of a storm or two.

The disciples were out on a boat in the middle of a lake – the Sea of Galilee – a lake closer in size to Lake Mendota than Lake Huron. The winds picked up and the boat was being tossed in the waves. Perhaps not as violently as the introductory scenes of the reruns from the old television series "Gilligan's Island," but enough to cause some concern within the hearts of the faithful twelve. The boat, quite a distance from the land, was beaten by the waves for the wind was against them. The hearts of the disciples must have been racing fast. Jesus, their leader, wasn't with them. They were out there alone; battling the storm alone. And then, in the 4th watch of the night – just prior to dawn – Jesus came to them, walking on the sea. Not too surprising, when the disciples saw him walking on the water, they were terrified! They thought he was a ghost, so they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them: "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Peter, a flawed yet faithful disciple, was dubious. "Lord, IF it is you, command me to come to you on the water." So Jesus replied, "Come." Peter was then in a bit of a pickle. Having put who he thought to be Jesus to a challenge, he had to follow through. But what if it wasn't Jesus? What if the anxiety of the moment had played tricks with the minds of the storm-tossed disciples? Peter wasn't completely sure it was Jesus, or he wouldn't have said, "Lord, IF it is you". It must have been with no small bit of trepidation that Peter stepped off the boat into the rocking waves in the middle of the storm. He was putting his trust – his faith – in what he thought was Jesus. So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and was going toward Jesus. He was really doing it! And then, as if waking from the first amazed thrill of it all, Peter fully realized what he was doing – where he was – saw the wind and the waves and, being afraid, started to sink. As his ankles and then perhaps knees started getting wet, Peter cried out to Jesus to save him, and Jesus immediately reached out his hand to catch him! Jesus then said to Peter: "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" They got back into the boat and the wind ceased. The storm ended. And those in the boat worshiped Jesus proclaiming, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Stormy times ... on Lakes Huron or Mendota; for the disciples out in the middle of the sea when the wind and the waves were howling. Stormy times, also in our own lives ... when a marriage breaks up after 23 years, when our young adult children make life defining decisions that we struggle with; when we're in the boss' office late on a Friday afternoon and we find that we're not expected to come back on Monday morning. Stormy times, when the doctor's report does not bring the good news that we expected, when the longed-for child doesn't come, when a very dear loved one breathes her last breath. The storm clouds gather, and they're thick and deep and black as night. And like the disciples in the boat, we're afraid. Because no one likes a storm – not when we're in the midst of it, and not when life as we know it is threatened so harshly. The storm rages around us and within us, and we wonder if we'll be able to keep our head above water.

As a Christian people, yes, we face storms – as large and as terrifying as anyone else – but we have someone who battles the storms with us. Not for us, but with us. We are not alone in the midst of the fury. Jesus the Christ – truly the Son of God – walks through the storm and comes to us. With determined steps and a steady march, he comes. Walking through our storm and reaching out to take our hand. He reaches out to us in our struggles. Our friends may fall away, our family may grow weary of our concerns, but Jesus will be there in faithfulness. No storm is so furious or long that he cannot enter. And he brings with him, not only the presence of the divine in the midst of the storm, he also offers the aid of the divine. *“Come.” Walk on the water with me. Rise above the storm with your faith. Do not let it overpower you, instead look for the power within you. Come. Walk on the water with me. “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”*

As faithful as we try to be, all of us have our times of doubt, do we not? We, like Peter, are flawed and faithful disciples. And sometimes our doubts rise to the surface in the midst of our storms – just when we need them the least. The clouds are rolling across the sky, gathering overhead, and we wonder if we're going to make it. What if ...? What if ...? What if ...? The doubts gather with a force that parallels the storm, and we feel ourselves sinking. We cry out in desperation, perhaps one last attempt to draw something from a faith that had been our anchor, but now seems to be drifting in the storm. Filled with fear and panic we may cry out, “Lord, save me!”

And the hand is there. Immediately. Reaching out. Catching a hold of our hand and going with us to the boat. The hand of Christ. The hand of God. Like Michelangelo's painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, God reaches out to us as we reach out to God.

When Jesus and Peter got back into the boat, Scripture tells us that the wind ceased. The storm was over. Our private storms may not end so suddenly – the issues may remain for a long time to come – but when we take the hand of Christ and walk on the water in faith, the force of the storm is lessened. It becomes more manageable. When we realize that we are not alone battling the storm, that we have someone whom we can rely on in any tempest, then the full power of the storm is taken away. Nothing can keep God's love from us. There is no conflict, no trauma, no life situation that can take us down, once we recognize the power of God's love in our lives. Once we take the hand that is continually and eternally reaching out to us.

The storms of our lives may sting. Our lives may be changed by their force, but they will not defeat us unless we let them. Not so long as we trust that Jesus is walking through the storms ... toward us, with us, saving us. “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” Amen.