

Sermon – Matthew 14:22-33; 1 Kings 19:9-18
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Grace Lutheran Church
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“Sheer Silence”

Sisters and brothers, friends in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day, in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Last month, before Wisconsin landed itself on the quarantine list, my family and I got away for a few days to Door County. One morning we signed up for a kayak tour. A shipwreck tour, to be precise. In retrospect, it seems an odd thing to go look at boats that have sunk while you yourself are in a boat that could sink; fortunately, I didn't think of this until after the fact. It was a lovely way to spend a few hours. We managed to glimpse a few old wrecks before the time came to head to shore. But wouldn't you know, that's when the wind decided to pick up; not a friendly breeze at our backs, either. It was a gusting headwind. Our poor children paddled, stroke after stroke, but for a while we didn't seem to be getting anywhere. Obviously, we made it back, none too worse for wear. But for half an hour of hard paddling, I was mindful of what those nineteenth-century sailors must have mused upon as their ships ran afoul of the rocks and reefs. Being out on the water is a lovely thing until it isn't. When the winds and waves start to rage, there's not always much to be done. When the storm turns on you, it's terrifying.
2. Matthew locates us this morning in just such a situation. Jesus, still desiring to be alone, has sent the disciples on ahead in their boat. As the daylight faded, the wind and the waves increased. They held on through the night only to see the strangest thing. Someone – a ghost? – walking toward them on the water. He speaks: “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” Peter, emboldened,

steps out of the boat. Immediately, however, his focus moves from Jesus back to the wind. And down into the water he starts to sink. When the storm turns on you, it's terrifying, and it's difficult to focus on anything else.

3. You don't have to spend a lot of time on the water to relate to Peter and his friends. We all know life's storms, have experienced the waves crashing over us and the winds pushing us further from safety. It seems as if this whole year has been a raging hurricane. There have been so many things going on that the year can't even tie up all of the loose ends to its plot. Remember murder hornets, anyone? In the midst of this pandemic, unlike any storm we've faced in our lives, waves come one after the other. Each of us has a different story, but there are common themes: Unemployment, isolation, uncertainty, illness, loneliness, exhaustion. Our nation teeters, it seems, on the brink of chaos. People whose skin looks like mine have been awakened in deeper ways to the sinful storm of racial injustice that we have inflicted upon Black and Brown people for centuries. We can relate to Peter today. Everywhere we stand seems no more solid than water.
4. As the storm rages we ask, where is God in all of this? This question draws us from Peter to Elijah, prophet of the Lord. Fearing that Ahab and Jezebel will kill him in the aftermath of his triumph over the prophets of Baal, Elijah travels for forty days to a place where he believes God will be found. He goes to Mount Horeb, otherwise known as Sinai, where Moses twice met God. First in the fire of the burning bush, then in a majestic earthquake while God spoke the commandments. Elijah goes, no doubt expecting something similar; a dazzling light show and words aplenty. A rock-splitting wind blows through, but no sign of God. An earthquake and then a fire; still no sign of the Lord. And then: sheer silence. Not a still, small voice, but silence. And in the silence, God is found. Not in the wind, earthquake, or fire. In the silence, Elijah can finally hear God.

5. It is the God of Mount Horeb who appeared to Elijah that walks now across the waters toward Peter and his storm-battered boat. God in Christ is in but not of the storm. He is the silence in its midst. His presence stills the wind and quiets the waters. And who is he? Before the disciples confess him as God's Son, Jesus tells us who he is. The translation I read a few minutes ago has Jesus saying, "It is I." Well, okay, good to know. But what Jesus actually says here is *ego eimi*, which is better translated, "I AM." In other words, Jesus speaks the same words that the Lord spoke centuries earlier to Moses on Horeb. In doing so he declares himself to be the One who created wind and water, the One who led the people out of slavery and into freedom, the One who gave the Law, the One who has come now to ransom his people and set them free. From fear, from sin, from death itself. He is the quiet at the center of this world's storms. Baptized in water, we stand on suddenly solid ground. His is the hand that reaches for us and pulls us to safety, holding us in the divine embrace as he brings us back to the boat.
6. Where is God in all this? Incarnate in Christ, God is present as the silence amid the storms. God is ever present, Jesus is always giving himself to us, creating the hope that conquers despair. God's presence transforms us. Call up for yourself a moment when you knew, simply knew, that God had drawn near to you. Not necessarily because you saw or heard anything, but because God is the I AM whose presence is hard to miss in such moments. I won't bore you with my own experiences of how I sat with God in this cathedral or by that lakeshore; neither will I attempt to give words to what God spoke to me in those fleeting, silent moments. While we can share reflected glimpses, I don't know that we have the artistry to convey the depths of divine encounters to one another. Or at least, I do not. So, think for a moment of when God spoke silently to you. This is the same God who is with you now in the midst of the storm. And if you cannot think of such a moment, if you feel you've never been brushed by the divine presence, believe anyway. You might feel that Jesus' rebuke of Peter is for you; that you are a person of little

faith. But perhaps this is no rebuke. Does not Jesus say that with faith like the tiny mustard seed you can move mountains? A little faith is still faith. You may feel you have not found God, but God finds you, nonetheless. God's promises are for you. Christ reaches out from his cross into your storm that you would be drawn into the dawn of resurrection hope, peace, and life.

7. This is what moments with God are for. It was true for Elijah and Peter; it is true for you. Time with God is transformative. The preacher Wendel Meyer writes, "An experience of the power and presence of God, however mundane or majestic, is designed to inspire transformation and growth. God reveals God's self in order to foster new understanding and self-awareness. Awe may provoke a feeling of holy terror in us, but ironically it should release us from our fears, not reinforce them." Friends, Christ comes to set us free. Finding the calm in the midst of the storm frees us to be storm-stillers in the world. To reach out our hands to the lonely and desperate. To speak peace in the face of oppression and injustice, working to make peace a reality. To name the sin of racism for the back-driving wind that it is and then work to adjust our sails as we seek God's beloved community.
8. God confronts and comforts us today, planting the cross of Christ at the center of the storm. If you're looking for God, look to Jesus who pours out his life to get us beyond death to the other shore. In the storm, listen for the silence, and know that God is with you, that Jesus's own hands reach for you, that his strong arms are lifting you up. When the storm turns on you, it's terrifying. But it's not the end. Jesus is coming, walking toward you with the silence in which God can finally be heard. The promise is for you. With even a little faith, you can get back out of the boat. It turns out there was solid ground there all along. I AM is here. Do not be afraid. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.