

Several years ago, only a few weeks after we had moved to Wisconsin, my family and I experienced our very first Midwest thunderstorm. At one point the wind and the rain got so bad that our power actually went out causing my wife Lyndsay to scream in sheer terror and our son Kenny to ponder what he would now do for entertainment without the use of a computer, television, or video game console. Of course things calmed down a bit once we are able to find some flashlights and light some candles. At one point our downstairs neighbor, a weather aficionado, texted us to let us know that he was watching the Doppler radar on his phone. He said that if it looked like the storm was getting worse that we were welcome to seek shelter in his basement.

That experience, and the others like it, have made we realize that storms come our way whether we are ready for them or not. In fact, during my short time here as the Pastor of First Lutheran I have learned that there are other storms that occur in life that don't involve hail, or lightning, or flash floods: During my very first day I was called on to visit a congregant who had been rushed to hospital, within my first month I was officiating at a memorial service for a beloved member of the congregation, eventually I found myself struggling with my own health issues which led me to a fairly invasive surgery to remove a bad infection in my chest, and just before that happened our beautiful State of Washington was practically ground zero for a Country wide pandemic. Talk about unexpected Storms.

And yet, whenever whirlwinds of trouble and difficulty seek to overwhelm us, I have frequently found that if we are able to keep our eyes focused on Jesus that he can help us face all kinds of bad weather! The gracious gift of faith, and the precious gift of his guiding spirit, can help us find the courage to face the Storms that materialize in our lives no matter what form they may take; be it the death of a loved one, the ending of a marriage, the loss of a job, or having to cope

with a debilitating illness. When we are able to keep the gaze of our eyes, and the conviction of our hearts, centered on Jesus he can lift us up and keep us from drowning. He can also help us to find not only the bravery to endure the storms that come our way, but the fortitude to take risks despite the forecast of tempestuous weather, or the possibility of being sunk by our worries and our fears.

In our Gospel story today we witness Jesus preparing his disciples for the downpour of hardships, that they will inevitably encounter, both before he is lifted up on the cross, and after he ascends into heaven. Each and every one of the twelve will need to find the courage to face the storms that are on the horizon. They would witness with their very eyes Jesus being betrayed by one of their own and being placed under arrest. They would experience failure firsthand as each of them would run off and abandon him. They would see Jesus put on trial, and they would actually watch him die. Later the disciples would encounter the risen Christ and would get to spend a short period of time with him, but eventually Jesus would depart from them to be with his heavenly father.

Perhaps it was their ability to keep their eyes, their thoughts, and their hearts on Jesus, even when he was not with them, that helped them find the eventual courage they needed. After all, his disciples saw with their very own eyes what could literally happen when one looks away from Christ. When Peter loses his focus, when he allows the rough weather and stormy water to distract him, he begins to drown. Even before that traumatic event happened out on the waters of the sea of Galilee that night, Jesus had been teaching his followers to keep their eyes on the prize, to keep their attention on him.

Just look at what happens at the beginning of St. Matthew's story! With a strong sense of urgency Jesus commands his disciples to get into a boat, and he sends them out on a journey across the lake. Keep in mind that they had just completed a hard day's work of feeding over 5,000 people, and had just collected

twelve baskets of leftovers, but for some reason immediately after this miraculous event Jesus books them on a cruise bound for Gennesaret. This is most likely because he didn't want his disciples to get caught up in what the crowd wanted to do with him. He didn't want his students to lose sight of his mission. In John's Gospel after everyone has been fed, the people intended to make him king by force.

Jesus obediently followed God's will, and God's plan for his life, and he did so by keeping his eyes on God! Notice as he attempts to teach his disciples to keep their eyes on him, so they could learn this important insight about faith, after he dismisses the crowd he hikes up a mountain to pray. It doesn't take much for us to consider the idea that perhaps he was having a heart to heart with his Heavenly Father, or that he was praying that his twelve students would learn to hold on to their faith as they encounter the storm on the lake. Maybe he was praying that his students would learn that he was always with them, even if he wasn't always physically present among them. Perhaps he was asking God to give Peter the courage to step out of the boat! After all, it would be an excellent teaching moment for his disciples, and it is an excellent illustration for us as well.

Whenever we find ourselves experiencing storms in our lives we can rest easy for we encounter several promises and assurances in our Story that can provide us with hope and comfort. First of all, we must never forget that God is always there guiding us along in life especially when we are going through some particularly bad weather. Did Jesus know the storm would take place when he sent the disciples out on the lake? Of course, but he also knew that he would go out to help them through it, just as he will always come to answer our SOS distress calls when we are in need of assistance.

Second of all, we must never forget that Jesus prays for us. On that mountain in our story, and throughout the Gospels, we witness him praying for his disciples

and for his followers. I believe that it is also safe to assume that our Lord talks to God on our behalf as well. Which begs the question, if you knew Jesus was in the next room praying for you, would it help you stay focused on him, and would it give you courage to endure whatever storm comes your way? Can believing that our Lord intercedes on our behalf, help us to let go of any fear we might have of following God's will, so that his mission and his work will be done in the world through us?

Lastly, the experience that Peter and the disciples went through demonstrate that no matter what, we need to keep our eyes focused on Jesus! When we fail to do this, when we take our eyes off Christ, it is easy to falter! It is easy to fall back into patterns of sin that can lead us into darkness and doubt. Fear can keep us from reaching the destination that Jesus is sending us to, calling us to, and it can keep us from realizing that we are a part of something bigger than ourselves. And it is bigger than what we like, or what we dislike, it is bigger than what we want, or what we desire. Keeping our eyes on Jesus can give us the courage to face the bad weather and do what God is calling us to do.

I mentioned earlier that storms can come our way in life and they take on different forms, the same is true when it comes to the church as well. Be it... financial difficulties when giving is down, a decline in worship attendance, the lack of people wanting to make a commitment or volunteer to fill a need, or the storm that can hit us when we are faced with having to make changes in the way we do ministry and worship so that we can reach people with the Good News of the Gospel.

Let's face it, when we are faced with having to make changes, when we are faced with moving from an exclusive self-focused way of doing ministry to a more inclusive missional mindset, storms can happen. After all, change can bring about all kinds of storms. This is something we are currently experiencing as we continue

to offer a different way for the members and friends of this congregation to experience worship. Learning how to join a Zoom Bible study or Coffee Hour, watching an online video as a way of attending a church service, sitting in your cars with bread and grape juice listening to a Pastor preach from a makeshift stage and altar area, can cause us to feel a little anxious or perhaps even a little afraid. Yet we do things because we believe that even when we find ourselves heading out into the unknown that the Spirit of Christ is there to hold us, to help us, and to save us!

The following is a true story. It was the mid 1800's and a young woman in New England was waiting for her sailor husband to return from a voyage to France. Every day she would go to the turret atop their home—often called the widow's walk because women watched and waited for husbands who never returned home after being lost at sea.

One evening as she wistfully looked out over the ocean, straining to see any sign of her husband's ship, she had a vision. She could picture in her mind a huge storm and the sailing ship being tossed like a toy boat on the ocean. She sensed that her husband was in danger and so she began to pray with all her heart. She remembered the Bible story of Jesus stilling the storm, and so she tried to picture Jesus reaching out his hands to calm the waters where her husband's ship might be. Then a sudden peace came upon her.

Several days later her husband's ship sailed into the harbor near their home. She ran to the dock to greet him. They embraced, and on the walk home he told her that the strangest thing had happened to them. He said that their ship had encountered bad weather and they had been lost at sea for days. Then what some called the perfect storm with waves taller than any building threatened to engulf the ship. The crew fought mightily to keep the ship from capsizing. Just when they thought all was lost, out of nowhere a figure surrounded by a bright light

appeared on the water. The waves and the wind ceased almost immediately, and the ship was saved. The sailor's wife turned to her husband, smiled and said, "I know. I saw Jesus too."

Let me remind you of what Jesus tells his disciples in our Gospel story. "Take Heart, it is I, do not be afraid!" As disciples, as a church body we are like a ship, or a boat, and I hardly have to tell you that ships are not meant to stay in the harbor nor are they to be dry docked. Sure they are safe in the harbor, but that isn't what they are built for.

Faith isn't about being able to walk on water, only God can do that. Faith is daring to believe, in the face of all the evidence that God is with us in the boat, when the storms of life hit us, and when we are willing to brave the storms by going out into the unknown. As commentator Douglas Hare writes, "The story about Peter graphically depicts what it means to be a Christian caught midway between faith and doubt. Peter represents all who dare to believe that Jesus is the Savior; they take their first steps in confidence that he is able to sustain them, and then forget to keep their gaze fixed on him instead of on the towering waves that threaten to engulf them." So let us always be mindful of the example that Peter provides us and let us always keep our eyes on Jesus, so that we can find the courage to face any storm!" Amen.