

Will You Get Out of the Boat?©**Matthew 14:22-33****August 13, 2017****Dr. Sharlyn DeHaven Gates**

Have you ever felt like maybe you'd bitten off more than you can chew? Like you're in over your head? It kind of looks like that was what Peter suddenly felt, walking on water toward Jesus, but suddenly getting scared and beginning to sink. I mean, who wouldn't get scared?

And look at all the other disciples. They chose to stay in the boat. They never even tried to step out of that boat in the waves and wind – regardless of who it was out walking on the water toward them.

It surely had been an exhausting day for the disciples and for Jesus. They heard that day that Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, had been beheaded. Who hears that kind of message and can just go on without being terribly affected?

Actually, Jesus heard the news and went off in the boat alone for a while. But the crowds would not leave him alone. They were anxious for him to teach them and to heal their sick.

They began to gather on the shore and finally, Matthew says, Jesus had compassion on them and he got out of the boat and began to heal. And when they were hungry he took what little food was available and multiplied it until there was plenty.

So after finally getting the crowd taken care of and trying to get them to go home, Jesus sends the disciples ahead to go to the other side of the lake in the boat and he does what he knows he needs to do – he goes up to the mountain to spend time in prayer. And he prays and rests until the early morning hours.

Meanwhile, the disciples are being tossed about in the little boat as the waves are getting higher and the boat begins drifting out to sea. Matthew doesn't tell us that the disciples were crying out for Jesus or that Jesus knows what is happening. He probably does. But he does go to them. Instead of taking another boat to get to where they are, Jesus takes a short cut. He just steps out onto the water and walks toward them.

Of course, this terrifies these very human men even more than the boat being battered around. Their superstition kicks in and they cry out "Look! It's a ghost!" Jesus' arrival is so unexpected and uncommon that they can't see the holy encounter they are witnessing.

We humans do tend to let our fears take over and when we do, we often miss the presence of God right there among us. But, it's also true that God is always ready to calm us and reassure us, just as Jesus did. "Don't be afraid," he said. "It is I."

Those words, "It is I," are the same words used by God in the burning bush when Moses asked who he was speaking. God's answer is translated as, "I AM." The disciples were finally getting to see that this was no less than an encounter with the holy, powerful God.

Peter just needed that little word of reassurance and he is out of the boat. He is gung ho ready to go to Jesus. Peter is always the impulsive disciple. He is passionate and sometimes speaks without thinking too much. Acts without thinking it through. But he is also the disciple whom Jesus said would be the rock that the church is founded on. If it weren't for Peter and his faith

and determination – and if it weren’t for many others who followed him in courageous faith and energy – the church would possibly not exist.

Once Peter realized it was Jesus he was looking at, all he needed was that word from the Lord, “Come,” and he was out of the boat and walking on the water. He was doing it! Until he wasn’t.

Until fear became stronger than faith. Until he took his eyes off of Jesus and realized how impossible this whole situation was. And he started sinking.

Of course, Jesus was there to lift him up and keep him from sinking into the stormy sea. He got him back in the boat with the others and then Jesus got in too.

“Peter,” he said. “You of little faith. Why did you doubt?”

I get the sense that Jesus was not so much criticizing Peter as much as he was kind of jesting, maybe a friendly dig at Peter. As we hear Jesus say this, we might also hear that subtext – “All things are possible with faith. Even faith as small as a mustard seed.”

There are so many times in our lives when Jesus is there – often times when we are least expecting it – when we are sinking in the storms of life. Perhaps we are in a financial crisis and we feel we are sinking deeper and deeper in debt and in fear of what is going to happen.

Or we – or our loved one – is in a health crisis. Maybe things look so bad you can’t see anything but darkness and storms ahead.

Whatever it is, we can trust that Jesus is right there; that he is fully aware of our storm and our fear and he is reaching out to lift us up and pull us close and reassure us that he is helping, saving us from the storm.

Does that mean our loved one – or even I – won’t die? Not necessarily. Probably the most feared storm of all of life is death. But in that worst, darkest storm, we have one of the most powerful promises ever. Jesus died to save us from death. He rose from death to life to give us the same life. He has, and will, save us from that most feared storm of all.

When we are right in the depth of the darkest night – when life is waning away from us – Jesus – the Son of the Great I AM – comes to us to lift us up and out of that miry, stormy pit, to hold us close to him, and to set us on the peaceful, bright shore.

Whatever the crisis, whether you expect him to be there or not – he is there. I promise. He promised. He will be there.

But, I want to think for a minute about us as Christ’s Church. I think many of us feel that the church is in a storm. The Church universal has lost members and seems to be declining – especially the mainline churches, as we are.

And it seems that more and more people are losing interest – they aren’t feeling that the Church is an important part of their life; it isn’t a priority for them. There are many reasons for this change I think. But the fact is, we are facing that all the time.

Leaders in the church are feeling discouraged because it seems that fewer and fewer people have the enthusiasm and energy to give their time and talent to help the Church to be vibrant and alive.

What is it? Is it a lack of interest? Or is it fear? Truth is, we have a lot to fear these days. We are facing competition like we've never faced before. Not just different denominations, or different religions (or no religion at all) but different worship styles and ways of doing music. What if we can't compete because we don't have the resources? What if we try and we don't succeed? What if we give ourselves and our energy and even our money and it all folds up and fails?

Our fear can stymy us in a way that keeps us from even ever trying to step out of the boat and start that walk toward Jesus. But if we don't, if we aren't like Peter, perhaps impetuous to a fault at times, yet so passionate, if we don't give it our best – we will surely sink.

Never fear, though, for Jesus is right there. He is right here encouraging us to get out of the boat – to take those impossible steps and come to him. Have faith. Believe it can be done. He is the reason we will not fail. Jesus is the only reason we could ever have the courage to step out of the boat. We would be stupid to do it, except for him.

The truth is, the Church really needs people who are willing to get out of the boat. Holly Presbyterian Church needs people to faithfully get out of the boat and do what we need to do.

Are you ready? What does getting out of the boat look like here in our church? We have all kinds of needs. It starts with serving on a team; with being willing to serve on Session if asked; to be a worship leader; to help with missions – like the baby pantry and all our outreach. We need people to help us get our young families back and our children having Sunday School. We need teachers. We need ideas.

Will you get out of the boat? Do not fear. Jesus is here and will keep us all above water. He always has and always will if we trust in him. Keep our eyes on him. Shall we get out together? Step out into the waves and the storms? Focusing on Jesus and his mission?

One. Two. Three. Go!!!