

Seeing More Than Ghosts
Bob Stillerman
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, 8-13-2022
Matthew 14:22-23

In last week's lectionary text, the author of Matthew uses the feeding of the multitudes to conjure up images of both the Exodus story – manna in the wilderness, and the Last Supper story – blessing, breaking, distributing, and regathering of bread. These images affirm the God-centeredness of Jesus, but also speak to God's liberating and creative power throughout both the first and second testaments. Ours is both a resourceful and redemptive Creator.

This week, there's also a nod to historical texts. Jesus will both walk upon and tame tumultuous seas. It's easy to remember the God of Genesis, the Creator who tamed the Chaos Monster, and stretched and formed the seas. And there's always, always, always, a hint of Exodus in Matthew's author. Remember, Moses, with God's help, parts the Sea of Reeds. God also gives us a name in Exodus: "Hey Moses, no need to be afraid, you are standing on holy ground. Kick off your shoes. You can just call me 'I am,' or 'I am who I will be,' if you want something more formal." Before the disciples recognize Jesus as the figure approaching them on the water, he tells them, "Take heart, it is I (no time for formalities!), no need to be afraid!"

Here's what I think is really fascinating about the last two weeks of text selections. Jesus is being intentional, visible, and approachable in sharing his sense of connectedness to God with those around him. There's something in Jesus' presence that's conjuring up similarities to the historical strains of God's ooey-gooey-ness. God has a history of working through ordinary people in a way that allows them to affect creation in extraordinary ways. In the presence of Jesus, there is abundance, and safety, and peace, and living water. But for the disciples, even amid this historical presence, there is still a lack of awareness.

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Last week, the disciples struggled to believe that they could find/give/provide bread in the wilderness. This week, they struggle to believe that Jesus can calm the waters. Peter even goes a step further – He, like Jesus, walks on water, but distracted/frightened by the strong winds, he begins to sink in the water.

There are days when I have less empathy for the disciples. When will they ever get it?!? But today isn't one of those days. You see, the disciples are in the thick of life – the messy, hard, hairy part. Tell me what your anxiety is like when you are tired and hungry at the end of a long day? And tell me how much belief you'd have when you suddenly realize you are responsible for ensuring that the 10,000 people who followed you to a deserted place didn't pack a lunch? And tell me, how much security have you felt in the middle of a storm? It feels tiny to be tossed in the vastness of a rough sea, or to look up into the face of dark and angry rain clouds.

We aren't our best in such situations. Our friends can offer us a thousand I-love-yous and I-like-yous, but our stress and angst can blind us to the aid. Who among us can't resonate with those times when we don't feel our act or do our best?!?

No matter. Jesus meets us anyway. Jesus meets us in the wilderness. Jesus walks toward us, right over choppy waters, to join us in the storm. Jesus offers a hand, even rescues us from drowning. Jesus offers the same love and consistency to the doubters, and the worriers, and the grumblers as he does to the confident, and the faithful, and the content.

There's another part of Matthew's gospel that's always important. We hear it from the beginning. We're told that Jesus will save his people

from their sins. Now don't get bent out of shape by that phrase. We aren't talking about individual flaws, or deeds, or shortcomings. We are created whole and wholly good. We're talking about corporate sin. We're talking about rescue from the systems that drown our sense of humanity.

That's where I think today's text is so telling. Because here's what systems do. They set us up to believe in disappointment rather than to hope expectantly. Systems seek to limit resources. Systems support the idea of a zero-sum game – if one of us has something, it means another one doesn't. Therefore, at any moment, goodness seems too good to be true.

We are liberated from Pharaoh, only to starve in the wilderness. We see the presence of God in front of us, but we are distracted by howling winds. When's somebody gonna pull the rug out from under us?

We aren't starving, Sardis. And we aren't stranded on a boat. But the systems, the systems still have their sway.

Baptist? Church? Progressive? Open and Inclusive? Spirit-led? Free-Church Liturgical? Collaborative? Partnering?

What's the catch? Is this Candid Camera? Surely the food's gonna run out soon. Surely there's a storm coming. Where's your pastor park the corporate jet? Are you still gonna love me once you really know who I am? Don't you dare ask me to be vulnerable, don't you dare ask me to leap into all of this, and then take it all back. We've been burned too many times for us such nonsense.

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Jesus, if we'll let him, seeks to liberate us from a world of gotchas. And Jesus gives us all the space and time we need to get there.

When it was all said and done, the disciples transcended from neophytes wondering how to multiply bread or survive choppy seas to leading a community where:

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all people. And day by day, the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Good friends, in the days ahead, may we be reintroduced to the resourceful God, and may God's presence and resourcefulness save us! And transform us. Save us from the anxieties of systems. And transform us into those who break bread and still seas. May it be so. And may it be soon. Amen.