

Psalm 91:1-7, 11-16, Matthew 14:22-33

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Evie Macway

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What if...

This morning I want to invite all of us to take a trip with our imaginations. Joining generations of Christians before us and letting our selves be immersed in the allegory and imagery that can be found in the story of Jesus walking on water. Making no attempt this time to explain the miracle, but instead letting it grow and expend in our minds and our hearts and taking our imaginations with it.

I was taught to be very careful of this practice, particularly with the parables of Jesus, but also with many of the other stories of the Bible, not to get too carried away with drawing firm parallels between the elements of a story and some aspect of our life today. To say, 'What this story is really talking about is...'

To do this can limit our understanding of scripture, pinning down a story to one firm meaning and therefore limiting how others, and we ourselves, could hear God's Word and feel the Holy Spirit at work through a text. But this morning I am going to throw all those cautions to the wind and do exactly that with this story, because there are times when stories are their most real and their most life changing precisely when we let our imaginations say, 'what if...'

What if the little boat in the story is the church. Now I am talking the greater church in the world, but if, in your imagination the boat is Stone Church, that is okay too. Because there is a lot going on right now. Honest, I did not pick out this text to go with this Sunday. It is what the lectionary gave us.

So the boat is the church. And the sea is all in the world that crashes in upon it. This night Jesus sends that boat of precious people out alone to face the sea. A sea filled with unknowns and prone to stir to a violent storm in a moments notice.

The story says that is exactly what happened that night. The wind and the storm stirred against the little boat and its occupants. The church out in the world.

But in the midst of the storm, **Jesus** comes to the boat walking **on** the turbulent water. Jesus Christ has dominion, has presence, has authority, even over the most turbulent of waters.

At first, fear clouds the vision of the occupants of the boat and they don't recognize Jesus. "It is a ghost!" they say. But immediately Jesus calms their fear. "Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid."

If the boat is the church, *what if* Peter here represents all the occupants of that boat/ church all rolled into one person. He wants to believe Jesus is Lord, God alive and with them, able to come to them no matter how fierce the storms. But part of him wants proof as well. Give me a sign Jesus, that I/we are doing the right things. Peter is the disciple most known for vacillating between fear and faith.

Sometimes he is the model of faith. When Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" it is Peter who answers, "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God!" (Matthew 16:15) affirming with certainty that Jesus is Lord. Other times fear alone guides Peter's actions. He is the one who three times denied even knowing Jesus at Jesus' trial. Does he remind you of anyone? A bundle of faith and fear and uncertainty all rolled into one? I know he reminds me of me.

Peter says to Jesus out there on the water, 'Lord', he does have some faith, but he is not quite sure, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.' Jesus says, "Come."

With Jesus' invitation, Peter leaves that boat and steps out of its relative safety and starts walking on the water. In that moment the faith prevails and Peter is not afraid even to do the impossible if Jesus commands it, walking on water. This works for the first few steps, but then Peter's mind and his eyes wander from Jesus and, the story says, "he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened and he began to sink."

And Peter does what all disciples, all occupants of that church-boat, do when we find ourselves frightened and sinking and he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus reaches out his hand and catches him and Peter was saved.

Jesus says, “Oh you of little faith, why did you doubt?” In this case the original word here translated doubt is not doubt as in not believing or skepticism. It is a different word rarely used; doubt as in vacillating, going back and forth between knowing for sure and wondering. Peter, oh you vacillator, sometimes faithful sometimes afraid.

Jesus and Peter returned to the boat together and the wind ceased. Those in the boat worship him saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

What does our imagination, all of the ‘what ifs’ we put on this story this morning, say about our lives today? Our gift for imagination is at its best when it helps us create, ‘what ifs’ that in some new way bring beauty, joy and new life to our ‘what is’, our realities. *To ask the, ‘what ifs’ is to challenge ourselves and to challenge the realities in which we live.*

We, the church, people of faith living in community today, continue to be sent out into the world. The storms of conflict, injustice, and tragedy can easily overwhelm us, sometimes even to the point that we do not recognize God when God is coming to us. But then there are times when the Peter in each of us takes over and we do *venture out* into the world, led by our vision of Jesus Christ, confident that anything is possible through God. We, as individuals and as a community of faith do miraculous things. When the fear and the doubt creep in, as they do for us as surely as they did for Peter, and we begin to sink, we too call out and God is there.

By asking the ‘what ifs’ today, by letting our imaginations place us in this story we challenge ourselves to look at the church and our part in it.

As I said earlier, I did not cherry pick this passage for this morning. But given where we are as a congregation I could not help but apply it in my imagination to our ‘what is’, our reality here. That sense of being tossed about, of wondering when the next wave will come, of being angry about how we ended up in this place to begin with. Where is Jesus in the midst of this storm?

And then of course there is the bigger picture of the rest of our world.

The church, all of us, continue to be called out and the world around us continues to be stormy. Wealth inequality. War. Homelessness. Social injustice. We can

easily feel battered, overwhelmed and afraid by what we see in the news and what we experience ourselves. Yet still we can step out, as Peter did, a mixture of faith and fear. Using our imaginations and our voices, our talents and faith to bring about realities that give life and give it abundantly.

In our context here at Stone we, you, don't know who your next called pastor will be. Or when that person may arrive. And you have had some rough waves to navigate in the time I have been here and before I arrived. You and your Session have some work ahead of you as you continue to make your way through this time. You are still figuring it out, and sometimes finding a healthy way forward probably feels as impossible as walking on water.

My hope and prayer is that you remember you are in this boat together. Fellow travelers. No one is perfect. But everyone is gifted and committed to this community. Have patience and grace. Look for God among you, amid your waves here, because God is here.

Today we take heart in the story of Peter and the little boat. That who we are, who you are, as church today, as followers of Jesus Christ, is people who continue to work to be faithful to God, to one another, to the world. Keeping our eyes on Jesus and what we can and do, do through him. Even amid the waves.

Sometimes we are strong, courageous, compassionate, trusting, gracious and confident that we can do anything when we keep our eyes on Christ and work together. And sometimes we are afraid, mistrusting, anxious and feel as if we are sinking. And God is here reaching out to us in all of it.

May we continue to ask, 'what if' in the midst of our realities, our 'what is', in ways that do bring community, trust and new life in our church and in our worldconfident that God is walking with us always, sometimes even on that water.