



SUNDAY SERMON

What the Water Wants?

DATE
Pentecost 10
Sunday, Aug. 9, 2020

PREACHER
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Matthew 14:22-33

This summer, a friend gifted me a copy of this book: *Citizen* by renowned poet Claudia Rankine. It is an anthology of poems that offer an unsparring, hard, and raw perspective of life as a Black American woman. One of her inspirations for several of the pieces was news coverage of certain national events in our nation's history and her incredulity at the overwhelming evidence of systemic racial injustice that still permeates our society today. The first piece she wrote for *Citizen* was inspired by CNN reporting on Hurricane Katrina in August of 2005. This month marks the fifteenth anniversary of when Katrina hit the Gulf Coast and quickly became one of the biggest and deadliest natural disasters to befall the U.S. in history. Rankine's poem has stuck with me for weeks, and has lingered in my mind, especially when reflecting on today's Gospel from Matthew. I'll read you some small excerpts that come from an interview of a couple who lost their child and their home in the storm:

"Faith, not fear, she said. She'd heard that once and was trying to stamp the phrase on her mind. At the time, she couldn't speak it aloud. He wouldn't tolerate it. He was angry. Where were they? Where was anyone? This is an emergency, he said."

"We never reached out to anyone to tell our story, because there's no ending to our story, he said. Being honest with you, in my opinion, they forgot about us."

"He said, I don't know what the water wanted. Call out to them. I don't see them. Call out anyway."

That line, "I don't know what the water wanted" has really stayed with me and it makes me wonder: what did the water want from the disciples, in the boat, far away from Jesus, fearful for their lives?

Our gospel text this morning is so rich and full. It is almost a mirror of itself: for every image or feeling we experience while reading it, we also encounter its exact opposite. For every reference to fear, there is one for safety. There is both turbulence and calm; clouds and sun, solitude and community, faith and doubt, focus and distraction, drowning and being rescued.

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In the ancient world, water and especially the sea were considered symbols of chaos and darkness, perhaps even the sign of a divine punishment from God. The imagery here of the disciples at sea being ravaged by a storm remind us of Jonah, of Noah and the ark, and of the creation story, in which God moved over the face of the deep to tame a primordial chaos. This story recalls Genesis 1 – but this time, it is Jesus appearing in all of his divinity, calming the waves and wind to save his friends. Only God could walk on water, could challenge this violent expression of evil, and here is Jesus – a sign of God’s presence in the midst of fear. Jesus will always walk through the messiness of our world and all of the evil chaos contained therein in order to save us, especially when we start to sink or fear being tossed overboard.

The imagery of raging waters brings to mind our own experiences with the ocean, with water, and with creation. We just experienced two hurricanes come through our region this past week alone, and indeed, August is rife with dangerous weather and storms for most of the Eastern and Southern United States. It also feels familiar in a way, as we try to float along and navigate a new global crisis with this pandemic.

I am the last person to invoke “learning” as some sort of hidden virtue of suffering – there is a slippery slope there – but there is a lesson I should have learned after Katrina that I missed in all of my privilege. If I had learned it, maybe I would be less surprised by what is happening in 2020. That lesson is: communities of color in New Orleans and elsewhere were disproportionately more affected by this natural disaster than neighboring white neighborhoods by a noticeable statistical difference. Displacement, death, injury, and economic ruin – those statistics show a very clear racial divide. This is not to say that this disaster did not affect everyone in its path, just that it revealed a level of racial injustice that perhaps had not been seen by many of the majority. The reason for this racial disparity is due both to decades of municipal and infrastructural neglect and the slow response of authorities to conduct rescue efforts in the lower wards of the city. Hurricane Katrina was a disaster that nobody caused or could have prevented. It was arbitrary: ruled by weather systems, winds, and climate. But the affect from Katrina was not arbitrary for everybody, just like COVID-19 is not arbitrary for everybody. Each crisis reveals a new part of this Body of Christ to which we belong that is deeply wounded.

I don’t know what the water wanted. What did the water want?

What does the water want from us? What does this virus want from us?

It is an interesting statement that invites us to place ourselves into the Gospel story in a new way. We are not reading from the disciples’ perspectives, or from Peter’s, or from Jesus’s. What is the water doing here? What is its purpose? Does it have one? Perhaps we spend too much time wondering if there is a purpose for the chaos and evil in our

lives and we get distracted by fear, forgetting that Christ is right there in front of us. I don't know if the raging storms have a purpose, but I think they might extend an invitation to us to examine our calls and our vocations as disciples of Christ.

This story is one about discipleship – Peter leaving the boat toward Jesus could be seen as an act of discipleship – of mission and ecclesiology – the church going out into the chaos of the world; or maybe the church is the boat and rocks at the whims of chaos. But what use is any of this imagery if we leave others behind? What does the water want from us?

It is trying to tell us to direct our focus. There are the countless other pairs of hands reaching up out of the water for Jesus – the ones we don't see, the ones we didn't even know were drowning, the ones other people thought were expendable. Even if our water is calm, there are others somewhere who are hanging on for dear life.

It would be inaccurate to interpret Jesus's admonition to Peter: "you of little faith" as Jesus telling us that we can avoid sinking into our own problems by just having more faith. Or at least, I don't buy that interpretation because I don't think that the promise of salvation is supposed to make everything easy for us, so that we show up in heaven unbattered and unbruised. Nor do I believe that the victims in Hurricane Katrina would have avoided their hardship if only they had prayed a little harder or trusted a little more. I even see Peter, not as someone with no faith in Jesus, but rather as someone eager to do something with that faith.

Rather, I think it is possible for us to be fearful and faithful at the same time, but, like Peter, we have to choose where we direct our gaze. Maybe there is no reason for suffering, but we know that God is present with all of us in the middle of it.

We are not meant to walk on water, only God, the Savior of all, can do that. But we can point to the hurting spots, we can operate searchlights in the waves to find people who others forgot, we can sit with our friends in the middle of their fear. That is what discipleship is.

This is what the water wants, and it is what Jesus calls us to do, too. Our daring to trust in God's presence in the sea allows us to take our focus off of some far-off rescuer and look out at the vast expanse. To completely torture this boat metaphor: discipleship might mean rowing our boats and pulling people in, or spent making structural changes: building bigger and sturdier boats so that every child of God can have a safe passage through this life. To focus on Jesus is to focus on others. The church should always be striving toward Jesus which means turning outwards and facing the storm.

And so, my friends, what does the water want from us? What does Jesus want from us?

How do we be disciples during this time when we perhaps feel most like Peter: sinking down with no one to grab us.

We are so very faithful, and also afraid of what is happening around us. Well, take heart, because God is present, the church will not look away from you. Keep focused on Christ by keeping focused on those whose hands we cannot see.