

Sermon “From a Deserted Place to a Shared Vessel” Minister David Jones

Last week, I found myself very comforted by the story of Jacob. Many preachers really work hard with that story to situate Jacob’s struggle with God in the wider context of his life--but I found myself latching onto the narrowest moment, the unadorned instant when they wrestle, because it was helpful to me -- and I hope to all of us -- to do so in our own time of struggle. By contrast, this week, our reading from Matthew is of the famous miracle of Jesus walking on water; let’s take a minute to remind ourselves what was going on in Jesus’ life and ministry that brought the disciples and Jesus to this famous moment.

So, at the beginning of this chapter in Matthew, Jesus has just received the awful news that John the Baptist--who of course had baptized Jesus at the outset of his ministry--had been imprisoned and recently executed by King Herod. Historically speaking, we don’t actually understand the precise nature of the relationship between John the Baptist’s ministry and the ministry of Jesus. But what scripture seems to affirm is that Jesus and John had at least a kind of mutual regard; their ministries were relevant to one another, and for the Christians who would eventually record their faith in the New Testament, John’s baptizing of Jesus was a decisive moment, a kind of passing of the torch, lending Jesus a crucial sign of authenticity and legitimacy. And this link or bond between these two ministries was equally perceived by King Herod. After King Herod has executed John the Baptist, reports of a new figure named Jesus and his powerful deeds begin to reach his court; Herod immediately declares, at hearing these reports, that Jesus must be John the Baptist back from the dead.

What we know for sure, in any case, is that Jesus was deeply affected by the news of John the Baptist’s death in our scripture. So impacted, in fact, that he withdrew from his ministry. John’s death is weighing so heavily on his heart, is so disturbing to Jesus, that he wants desperately to be alone, *needs* to be alone. He gets into a boat and makes way for a deserted place, a place where the mantle of ministry--and all that he seems to be carrying with him that he received from the Baptist--can be set down for a time. Jesus is heartbroken, he needs time and space to just be a man who has lost someone dear to him. (This summer, I’ve spent a lot of time with the families and especially the sons of prominent men in our community who have passed. When I have visited with them, they often can’t bring themselves to say too much; they don’t want to speak at the funeral, it’s too soon, they need time for everything that is on their heart to be left alone, to be in a deserted place, where the full meaning and impact of their relationships can just be allowed *to be*). Jesus is the same as any of us that are experiencing acute grief. He

wants to sit alone with his treasured memories, his deep admiration, and even with the haunting pain in the awful knowledge that his friend John had been made to suffer at the hands of King Herod. Jesus' disciples, for their part, try to respect this, and not force Jesus to go on teaching and leading when he needs this break.

As I said, I chose to focus very narrowly on Jacob wrestling with God last week, but we did also read from the Gospel according to Matthew. Our reading from Matthew last week picks up from exactly this moment, when Jesus has sought out a deserted place to grieve the death of John the Baptist. Unfortunately, it is not so easy sometimes to step away from our lives, even when we desperately need to; you can imagine this is especially difficult for a teacher like Jesus. And sure enough, when a crowd of people learn that Jesus is nearby, they gather to see and hear him. That's when the disciples try to shoo the crowd away, imploring Jesus to send them off. But Jesus sees that the crowd gathered is as desperate, is as grief-stricken as he is, though for different reasons. Many in the crowd are sick, they are poor and hungry. As the scripture says, "Jesus had compassion for them." Instead of sending the crowd away, he ministers to them, to all those who had gathered, miraculously feeding each and every one of them from only five loaves and two fish.

This brings us to our reading from Matthew today. The crowd now healed and fed, Jesus does finally dismiss them. And he asks the disciples to leave him alone to his grief. When he goes up the mountain to pray into the darkening evening, he does so with the awful news of John the Baptist still on his heart. Leaving him alone as he wishes, the disciples set out on their boat into the sea. But we learn that the conditions are bad, the wind and waves carry their vessel far away from the land. It is not until the next morning, at least many hours --if not fully half a day--later, that Jesus comes down from the mountain and appears to the disciples walking on the sea, some distance from them.

It is this moment, like the moment when Jacob was wrestling with God, that often draws our attention and focus. We think about this instant, when the disciples catch a glimpse of Jesus, walking toward them on the water; then that instant when Peter, assured that he is seeing Jesus and not an apparition of another kind, takes his own timid steps onto the water, faring well until he remembers the strong wind that had gripped their boat in the night. Or we think about the next instant, when Peter falls through the water and is sinking, is drowning even, before Jesus reaches out his gracious, caring hand and lifts him up to safety and peace. We think about how Jesus' mere presence on the boat brings the strong wind to a stop, and the disciples together behold Jesus in a new, more divine light.

But what really tended to my doubts and captured my faith this week, as I worked on today's service alongside the committal service for Bob Bates held yesterday, was not these more famous moments, but rather the more subtle ones that precede them in this passage. I was struck, as I remembered that Jesus was praying in a condition of profound grief, how the strong winds and battering waves against the disciples' boat--how their remoteness from the safety of the land--seemed to articulate and render Jesus' emotional unrest. I think it's worth remembering that Jesus not only saw part of himself in the life of John the Baptist, but must also have seen part of himself in the violent death of John the Baptist. I think it's worth remembering that Jesus went looking for a deserted place, and climbed a mountain so that he could be alone, and prayed fervently for many hours by himself not only to attend to his grief, but very likely to attend to his fears and self-doubt. Jesus strongly identified with the Baptist. And it is the dangerous and violent King Herod who, at the very beginning of this same chapter, explicitly links John the Baptist to Jesus as he learns of what Jesus has been up to.

So it is striking to me, that as their teacher Jesus prayed anxiously alone in a deserted place, high on a mountain, in a state of deep grief and fear--at that same moment in the night, the disciples were being gripped by strong winds and were drifting to a distant place in the sea, also becoming afraid. The remoteness of their respective places seems to be intimately related.

So maybe Jesus and the disciples, in this very famous passage, are actually mirror images of one another. Maybe Jesus is able to playfully quip to Peter, "oh ye of little faith," because he has just spent the night questioning his own. Maybe this image of Jesus walking on the water is a way to communicate how we are miraculously linked in spirit, how faith is a way to fold time and space to quickly travel from the peaks and valleys of fear and anxiety and arrive together in the same secure boat. After all, the boat is an ancient symbol of the church. For me, this week, navigating grief, continuing to navigate the uncertainty and the anxiety brought on especially by the pandemic, this famous passage in scripture did not strike me as a strange and mysterious miracle, but instead as the clear and common miracle of finding peace by coming down from the mountain or up from the sea into the peace of a shared vessel. We will all grieve in this life, we will all have moments of awful fears and great doubts. But if we dare to live life together, dare to have faith in *this* life together, then we can rest assured that we will find our way to calmer winds, and to shore, *together*.

Alleluia and amen.