

“A Defiant Faith”

The Rev Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages
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Psalm 46:1-11

Mark 14:1-33

“As he went ashore he saw a great throng;
and he had compassion on them, and healed their sick.”

Mark 14:1-33 (RSV)

Let us pray... O God,
Help us in the midst of times of our distress
and strengthen us to your good purpose.

Amen

This year as we enter the season of Lent, I want to provide you with a portrait
of Jesus Christ through a tableau of stories that lead up
to his decision to go to Jerusalem.

We may have this preconceived image of him as being above it all,
surrendering his life to an inevitable crucifixion
while dispensing Hallmark card wisdom along the way.

There is a brief instance of crisis in the Garden of Gethsemane
when Jesus calls out to God to take that ‘cup’ of death from him
but otherwise he proceeds with resolution and resignation.

What if it was a more perilous set of circumstances
with a wider margin for failure – and courage
on the part of Jesus of Nazareth?

What if he was more human than we give him credit to be?

In preparing my sermons in recent weeks,
I have wondered what purpose miracle stories serve since
these capabilities can’t be replicated by normal human beings.

It’s one thing for Jesus the Son of God to feed 5,000 people
with a couple loaves of bread and some fish,
but it’s another thing for any one of us to do it –
though for special dinners here at UCC at The Villages,
Jerry & Barbara Fabian seem to come close.

What I am inclined to believe though is that
the miracle stories in the Bible have served to help
people through the ages to dare to dream big –
especially in the face of great challenges
like discrimination, war, poverty, illness, and death.

They provide spectacular – almost absurd and even hilarious visions
of achievement and success against the harsh realities of this life.

Willard, p.2

The Son of God is presented to us as a wandering peasant,
‘a sweaty Galilean’ who goes around doing good.

He is the mask of a God who loves human-kind,
healing people from disease and shame, teaching them through stories,
fearlessly confronting falsehood and arrogance,
bringing peace to the fearful, and provoking courage that defies despair.

Then, John the Baptist is assassinated
by ‘the powers that be’ of society back then
and sets into motion a series of events that will lead to Jerusalem.
It is the turning point of Jesus’ ministry and his life on Earth
and will bring into focus what it really means
to be the Son of God who is also the Son of Man –
the True Heir of Human-kind.

We don’t know how Jesus felt when he received the news that John was dead,
but the Gospel of Matthew gives us a clue when it says that
he simply sailed away in a boat without even a word.

What must have gone through his mind then?

Was his sudden departure out of precaution? Was it out of fear? Or rage?
Did he go to plan? Or simply to grieve?

But there waiting on the beach for him
was an immense crowd.

And we are told that they came to this desert place from various towns –
Galilee most likely, which was close enough
for people to walk to get there, but too far to walk back by nightfall.
And these were people who knew Jesus and his ability to heal and teach,
and it would seem that they cared about him, too –
and may very well have come to console him.

Anybody who has worked in social services –
whether that is as a teacher in school or working as a health professional,
knows that you can’t count on getting emotional support
from the people you serve, because they need to draw energy from you.
To some extent for parents, it’s that way, too.

And even though this crowd may love Jesus and want to help him,
they needed to be healed and fed.
And so, Jesus fed them – 5,000 and even more because they didn’t think
to count women and children back then.

Willard, p.3

It was as if Jesus needed to work off all that energy within him
that could have exploded into violence
or corroded from within into depression.

Instead, we have this magnificent image – an icon of what God is like,
providing us literally with our daily bread.

Think of it – compared to the crucifixion, isn't this as significant
if not as dramatic an image of what Jesus Christ is all about?

Despite grief, fear, or rage,
he gives of himself to feed and comfort multitudes in their distress.

However this miracle was done – whether as a table blessing or
by some supernatural multiplication of bread and fish,
or simply calling forth the generosity of people to share,
can you imagine what such an event could have been like?

Imagine the absurdity of feeding all those people with somebody's lunch
and the hilarity that very likely would have followed
such a daring demonstration of defiance.

But Jesus still needed to have solitude to pray
and so he sends the disciples back across the waters and
and allows the crowd to settle down for the night.
so that finally, he is able to go up the mountain to talk to God.

Now, the word for 'wind' in both Hebrew and Greek can also mean, 'spirit' –
In this story, the disciples' boat is slowed down
by an opposing 'wind' which suggests opposition by an evil spirit.
But then Jesus comes walking on the sea toward the disciples
in what seems to be an intentional reference to the activity of
the Holy Spirit at Creation moving across the face of the deep.

And Peter steps out of the boat on faith to meet Jesus,
and is able to walk on water himself
until he is distracted by the violent storm.

And don't we get distracted by all the bad news swirling about
of world and local events, economic downturns, threats of war,
violence in schools and the workplace,
crises that affect jobs, real estate, health.

Yet there is this image of Christ in our Bible –
of a prevailing good that defies fear and doubt.

We have this image of the Son of God in the form of the Son of Man
hovering over the watery chaos of life to lift us up and carry us through.

Willard, p.4

Herod was compelled out of self-preservation

to maintain the image of control when he had John killed.

Jesus chose to respond with creative demonstrations of his power

by feeding 5,000 people and walking on a stormy sea.

One acted out of selfish appetite and the other acted unselfishly

to help ease the deep hunger and fear of others.

There will be those who question your belief and understanding of God
and question whether or not you are a Christian.

They will tell you that God is intolerant and angry, ready to judge the world –
as indeed, God should be, but not for the reasons they claim.

We celebrate a God who celebrates us

through the wild diversity in which we were created.

God calls to us in the midst of the storms of our lives

to climb out of the boat of conformity and trust Christ's example.

We are to defy old prejudices that present themselves as tradition

and that prevent people from living authentic lives and achieving peace.

We have been given these images of God through the stories of Christ

so that we can begin to recognize God's tremendous power –

not as destructive judgment,

but as transformative justice and healing mercy.

And that God has a sense of humor that is doled out

with a liberal use of zaniness to flabbergast the "Pharisees" –

then and now.

God is still speaking to us through these stories and through our lives

so that we can re-imagine what this world can yet be.

And we better get going soon.

Those who have ears that can hear had better be listening.

Amen

*Psalm 46 proclaims one of the greatest lessons for us in the Bible:
That God is always with us no matter what...*

- ¹ God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
- ² Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
³ though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.
- ⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.
- ⁵ God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.
- ⁶ The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.
- ⁷ The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.
- ⁸ Come, behold the works of the LORD;
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.
- ⁹ He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.
- ¹⁰ 'Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth.'
- ¹¹ The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Matt. 14:1-33

[1] At that time Herod the tetrarch heard about the fame of Jesus;

[2] and he said to his servants, "This is John the Baptist, he has been raised from the dead; that is why these powers are at work in him."

[3] For Herod had seized John and bound him and put him in prison, for the sake of Hero'di-as, his brother Philip's wife;

[4] because John said to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her."

[5] And though he wanted to put him to death, he feared the people, because they held him to be a prophet.

[6] But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Hero'di-as danced before the company, and pleased Herod,

[7] so that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask.

[8] Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter."

[9] And the king was sorry; but because of his oaths and his guests he commanded it to be given;

[10] he sent and had John beheaded in the prison,

[11] and his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother.

[12] And his disciples came and took the body and buried it; and they went and told Jesus.

[13] Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a lonely place apart. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns.

[14] As he went ashore he saw a great throng; and he had compassion on them, and healed their sick.

[15] When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a lonely place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves."

[16] Jesus said, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."

[17] They said to him, "We have only five loaves here and two fish."

[18] And he said, "Bring them here to me."

[19] Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass; and taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven, and blessed, and broke and gave the loaves to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.

[20] And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over.

[21] And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

[22] Then he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds.

[23] And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone,

[24] but the boat by this time was many furlongs distant from the land, beaten by the waves; for the wind was against them.

[25] And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea.

[26] But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out for fear.

[27] But immediately he spoke to them, saying, "Take heart, it is I; have no fear."

[28] And Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water."

[29] He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus;

[30] but when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me."

[31] Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "O man of little faith, why did you doubt?"

[32] And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased.

[33] And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."