

Message of Hope

Matthew 14:22-33

Do you remember the 33 coal miners who became trapped underground in Chile in 2010? They were stuck under 700 feet of dirt and rock when the mineshaft collapsed. They remained entombed for 69 days before they were all rescued.

Can you imagine being a coal miner? It takes a special person to be a mineworker — a miner has to be someone who does not suffer from claustrophobia and who is able to work long hours knowing that there are hundreds of feet of solid earth separating him or her from fresh air, sunshine and freedom.

When a mine catastrophe occurs, there is a series of events the mining company must immediately initiate. First, the rescue team must try to locate where the miners are trapped and determine if anyone survived the accident. We might think the next step would be to plan the best way to get them to freedom. But before determining an escape route and before any machinery is set into motion, the rescuers work to communicate with the miners who are trapped so far below.

Mining companies have learned that trapped miners can survive up to five times longer when they realize that someone knows where they are. In the case in Chile, it took 17 days of nonstop searching to discover the location of the miners. Once that was determined, a message was lowered through a drilled hole to tell the trapped workers that rescuers knew where they were.

Nothing had actually changed — they were still trapped, they were still hundreds of feet below the surface and there was no immediate plan in place to get them out or even a certainty that their rescue was possible. The trapped men still had many reasons to be

afraid. But the good news was that they had not been abandoned to their fate. Others were working on their behalf, and this gave the miners tremendous relief.

There is great power in hearing the words “I know where you are, and I know what you are going through.”

When Jesus goes across the sea to meet the disciples who are being battered by the storm, there is no mention in this story (unlike in Mark 4, another story with a boat and a stormy sea) that Jesus calms the storm or quiets the wind that is causing all the trouble. Instead, Jesus comes to the disciples exactly where they need him most — in the midst of the storm. He knows where they are, and he knows that they need him.

His appearance terrifies them because, after all, he has defied all laws of gravity and logic by showing up next to their boat. But Jesus brings with him the powerful message of a God who cares: “Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid.” Here is Jesus saying, I know where you are. I know about your fears. I know the difficulties that you are facing. I know the challenges that are in your life. You are not alone; I am with you.

This is one of those Bible stories that people love to tell but hesitate to believe. It’s the walking-on-water part that really makes this story so challenging, especially for adults. This story is included in every children’s Bible because it offers such a dramatic picture of Jesus — as if he is Savior as superhero. *Look! Over the waves! Into the seas! It’s Jesus!* There’s always a wonderful and colorful picture of Jesus striding across the waves and reaching out his arms to the terrified disciples.

And while that may sound like a fun story to tell children — Jesus can do anything! — many adults are tempted to relegate this account solely to the children’s hour. At first glance, it doesn’t seem to have anything to do with the hard realities of adult life today.

It would be too bad to toss this story aside. Although even many adult Bibles entitle this section of Scripture simply as “Jesus walks on water,” there’s much more to this account than the image of Jesus splashing atop the waves to reach his followers.

This story tells us about **who** Jesus is. Notice that Jesus does not change the circumstances of the disciples. They remain in the boat, and the wind and waves continue to batter them. There is a saying that “Sometimes God calms the storm. And sometimes he allows the storm to rage and calms the child.” In this case, as is so often true in our lives, there is no simple fix or magical cure for a dire situation. But Jesus enters into that great need.

This story tells us about the Jesus we can pray to and count on today when we find ourselves, like the disciples, over our heads and feeling like we are about to drown in sorrow, stress or sickness.

Jesus comes to the disciples in their helplessness, just when it seems that all is lost. Do you ever wonder who Jesus is and what Jesus offers us today? This story tells us that Jesus is the one who:

- hears the cry of the frightened, the weary, the overwhelmed;
- refuses to leave them alone;
- tells them to “take heart” — not because the situation is magically changing but because he is there to offer his strength and support and guidance;
- reminds them, “Do not be afraid,” because they are not alone — they are in the presence of God.

Jesus enters into an impossible situation and offers courage. His presence gives

them hope; they have not been abandoned in their despair.

Peter — of course, it is Peter — is inspired by Jesus' appearance and his words of hope. Even in this terrifying situation, Peter wants to be a disciple and follow Jesus, even if that path leads onto the stormy sea. Jesus is willing to help Peter **and us**. Jesus invites Peter to step out onto the water, not simply so that Peter can walk on water but so he can know and experience that Jesus is with him even in the scariest moments.

Peter does well as long as he keeps his eyes on Jesus, but as soon as he realizes the very real danger he is in, he begins to sink into the foamy water. Here is a lesson for each one of us: We are also invited to “walk on water” — to go into a situation where there is need or fear. We are walking on water every time we dare to reach across the divide and let someone know that he or she is not alone in despair. When we send a card letting someone know that we care, when we pick up the phone and break the silence, when we venture into the hospital room, when we tell someone, “You are not alone,” we are following in Jesus' footsteps and speaking words of hope in the midst of crisis.

There is a story of a man who was walking down the road when he suddenly fell into a huge hole and could see no way to get out. He called for help, but people passed on by without bothering to stop. One man looked down into the hole and called out, “You ought to be more careful! These holes are dangerous.” And, having shared that piece of wisdom, the man continued on his way. A woman on her way to church heard the man shouting and peered down into the darkness. “I will pray for you when I get to church,” she assured him as she hurried away in order not to be late for worship. Finally, a young man heard him calling and then jumped down into the hole with him.

The man looked at him in disbelief. What are you doing?” he cried in dismay.

“Now we are both stuck down here!” But the young man said, “No worries. You see, I have been in this hole myself, and I know the way out.”

Daring to enter into someone else’s pain — that’s what Jesus did when he met the disciples on the stormy sea, and that is what we are called to do as well.

Instead of being a story about magical super-powers, this is a story that reminds us that God will never leave us or forsake us. God will seek us out in our moments of greatest need.

With this story, Jesus invites us to dare to follow him even into the most difficult situations. Unlike the young man who jumped in the hole, we may not know the way out. We may not be able to fix or change the difficult circumstances of another person, but we can let them know that they are not alone.

The hardest place for us to go can be where there is the most need. Visiting in a hospital room, sitting with someone in grief, encouraging someone after a job loss, supporting someone in the battle with addiction — all of those situations can seem as terrifying and overwhelming as a raging sea or sinking boat. To enter into a place where there is real fear and despair, and where people have every right to be afraid or lonely — that is where Jesus dares to go. And that is where Jesus invites us to follow.

Let’s keep our eyes firmly on Jesus and dare to follow him as he offers his message of hope.