

SERMON “When the Storms Come, Cheer Up! It is I! Don’t Be Afraid!

(Matthew 14:22-33 Preached at MPC on August 13, 2017)

After hearing today’s gospel story, I wonder how Peter and the other disciples might have remembered this story in hindsight or after the fact. They had been scared out their wits and totally frightened when they saw what they thought was a ghost—Jesus walking on water—and impetuous but courageous Peter kind of made a fool of himself by stepping out of the boat and sinking.

While I was reading, and thinking about this story, I came across an article by Christian author Philip Yancey, where he talked about his grandmother's tendency to recall difficult times even "with a touch of nostalgia." Yancey mentioned polls that suggested that during the London Blitz, when London was on the receiving end of German bombs, was for many Londoners one of the happiest times of their lives. It might not have been happy at the time of the bombings, but they remembered it happily, because "a new spirit of community and patriotism sprang up to overshadow even the horror of bombs and V-2 rockets."

The Brits also remember very fondly the historical event that changed the outcome of WWII in the rescue of stranded troops at Dunkirk. Just this past July 21st, the epic war film, “Battle of Dunkirk” was released. Christopher Nolan, American-English producer and director and his crew went through great pains to faithfully recreate “Operation Dynamo”, which took place between May 26 and June 4, 1940 and saw some 338,000 troops rescued from the beaches of Dunkirk. Here are just few amazing facts about this miraculous event.

During May 1940, the so-called “phony war” came to an end as the Germans swept through Belgium and Northern France in a Blitzkrieg that left many soldiers of the British Expeditionary Force, BEF, stranded as they were pushed back towards the sea. The new prime minister at the time, Winston Churchill, ordered the BEF’s commander, Lord Gort, to evacuate as many troops back to Britain as possible as the army retreated to the area around the port of Dunkirk.

On May 20, 1940, the British began formulating Operation Dynamo, led by Vice-Admiral Bertram Ramsay. It was named after the dynamo room in the Dover cliffs where their operation HQ was based. “Nothing but a miracle can save the BEF now,” said General Alan Brooke. So, a call was sent out for as many naval vessels as possible

to help the Royal Navy— including small craft that could get close to the waiting soldiers in the shallow waters. The smallest boat on record to take part was the Tamzine, a 14ft open-topped fishing boat, now in the Imperial War Museum.

On the eve of the operation a national day of prayer was declared with King George VI attending a special service in Westminster Abbey. But over the next eight days a total of 338,226 Allied soldiers and 140,000 French, Polish and Belgian troops were successfully brought back, across the English Channel while under attack on all sides.

The total number of vessels involved, including Royal Navy ships and civilian craft, was 933. History records Churchill giving one of his most famous speeches to the House of Commons in which he vowed that: “We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills. We shall never surrender!” The phrase “Dunkirk spirit” has since become part of the language used to toast people who pull together in a time of adversity.

Yancey goes on to tell about these Brits and non-Brits—elderly people who happily swap stories about the Great Depression, World War II, and the Battle of Dunkirk—three of the most terrible times of the past century. Yancey noted, “They speak fondly of hardships such as blizzards, the childhood outhouse, and the time huddled in a London subway when bombs exploding outside, and when they ate canned soup and stale bread for three weeks in a row.”

I think that Yancey has something there. We all have recounted hardship stories to our friends, family, and our children often enough that they roll their eyes for those old stories we have retold too many times. “Yeah, Dad, we know,” they say. “You walked five miles back and forth to school every day uphill both directions!”

So, I can imagine how the disciples would remember this story of Peter and the storm fondly. “Hey, do you remember the time that Peter stepped over the side of the boat and sank like a rock!” And they would all laugh. I don’t think they would laugh in Peter’s presence, of course. Peter was the Alpha Male in that group, and you had to be a little careful what you said around Peter. But that’s what made the story so delicious.

Here was Peter—strong and tough—stepping out of the boat and sinking like a rock—Hollering, “Lord, save me!” I am sure that every now and then the disciples would resurrect that story—and a few more like it just for laughs. But they weren’t laughing

that night. They were in a storm in a small boat in the middle of the Sea of Galilee.

They had been with Jesus all day before and had been rowing against the wind most of the night. They were wet, exhausted, and far from home. I can't imagine circumstances much more miserable—maybe the rescue at Dunkirk.

But then one of them spotted something odd. It looked like a man walking across the water. The disciples were fishermen, and they knew where they were in the middle of nowhere. The only thing that they could imagine was that they were seeing a ghost. A problem with seeing a ghost, of course, is that you don't know what to expect. You don't know whether you are really seeing a ghost, your eyes playing tricks, or simply going mad. The most frightening thing, of course, is that the ghost might be coming to make a ghost of you.

It is worth noting that the disciples had not made the decision to cross the sea at night at that time. But Jesus “told” them, issued a command—they needed to cross the sea and they were simply following his orders. Did you ever feel like you were doing what Jesus wanted you to do only to find yourself in getting into trouble?

That's happened to me more than once. I recall selling Time Warner Cable as a sales rep up in Concord North Carolina during my first year as a seminary student in Charlotte. I believe Jesus gave me that job with three specific objectives or commands to learn from that assignment. 1) I was to learn rejection as Christ was rejected—try selling anything door to door and you will experience rejection). 2) I was to learn perseverance—I was given 100 names every week by my supervisor to make personal contact with—so never give up. 3) I was to learn how to witness to people. The first two lessons were painful and very discouraging during my 6 months with TWC—however I found once I engaged people in conversation and they were receptive to my sales pitch, Jesus gave me favor to witness and pray for whatever concerns they had at that moment.

But one afternoon after a snowstorm struck Charlotte the day before, I was out in a trailer park selling cable—doing what Jesus wanted me to do—it was getting late and darkness was coming on. I found myself trapped in the middle of this trailer park stuck on an icy slope. I couldn't get enough traction on my back wheels to get up that incline. I was anxious and angry at the same time. I remember praying and asking Jesus for help.

No sooner had I finished the prayer, I felt a knock on my window—a young man living in the park was standing there—I opened the window and he said, “Can I help.” I told him I was stuck on the ice—He went to get some worn out blankets and placed them under my back wheels. After a few start and stops, I was able to get up the slope and I waved to him in thanksgiving. Some years later, I found a story about St. Theresa, who found herself stuck in mud on one of her journeys for Jesus, and she expressed it perfectly. She shouted at God: "If this is the way you treat your friends, no wonder you don't have many!" Exactly!!! It I had had my wits about me that night, I might have cried out: "If this is the way, you treat your friends, Jesus, no wonder you don't have many!"

At any rate, I can appreciate how the disciples felt in their little boat in the middle of nowhere with a storm raging around them—doing what Jesus had told them to do. There are other stories where they were afraid, but in this story, they were just tired and miserable—Until they saw the ghost!

When they saw the ghost, they pretty much came unglued. These tough fishermen had faced death more than once without flinching—but they flinched when they saw the ghost. I'm sure that in years to come they would nudge each other and tell their ghost story and laugh. But they weren't laughing that night. They were wet and exhausted and miserable—and scared! And I can't say that I blame them. Jesus responds, “Cheer up! It is I! Don't be afraid!

I came across a quotation that really fits our message for today—a quotation that we all ought to learn. The quotation is by the Rev. Professor Charles E.B. Cranfield, leading British New Testament Scholar of this century—He who wrote a commentary on the Gospel of Matthew. Cranfield said: "If it is a result of obedience to Christ's command that the church or the individual Christian is in a situation of danger or distress, then there is no need to fear."

What that means is this: If we are doing what God wants us to do, by the grace of God, it will come out O.K. It came out O.K. for those disciples that night. It came out O.K. for all those British, Polish, French, and Belgium soldiers in May of 1940—it came out O.K. for me that night trapped in trailer park. Jesus told the disciples who he was and joined them in the boat. When Jesus came to them, the storm stopped!

Friends, when Jesus comes to us—when we invite him into our hearts—the storms stop!

That's not a promise or guarantee that you won't have any problems when the storms of life come if you follow Jesus, because that isn't true. The disciples had plenty of problems after they began to follow Jesus. Mother Teresa had problems. You and I have problems—the church has problems—the world has problems. But Jesus calms the storms—He says, “Cheer up! It is I! Don't be afraid.”

But when Jesus comes to us when we allow ourselves to be quiet for a few minutes and invite him to guide and save us—the storms abate. When we know that Jesus is with us, we find that we're no longer afraid. When we're doing what Jesus wants us to do, we can be sure that everything will come out O.K.

I hope all who attended our PDC retreat will turn in their evaluations and leave them brother John's puka. I hope all who have not read the book or watched the DVD will still follow through and make that commitment. I will issue a call and ask two questions in my report to our next session meeting. I will ask the session members based on what they have seen, read, discussed, and presented in our Purpose Driven retreat, 1) Is this the direction we want our church to navigate to? 2) What comes next?

In the days ahead, we will face many storms—some personal and some related to where we are going as church. Some of them will be little squalls that pass by quickly, but others could be full-blown or major hurricanes. Let's get ready! Let's get in the same boat with a new spirit, like the spirit of Dunkirk to overcome all adversity, and invite Jesus to join us—to come into our hearts—to direct our lives—to guide us day-by-day and even moment-by-moment. If we will do that, when the storms come, we will be O.K. all by the grace of God.

Let us hear these living words of scripture and know absolutely in Romans 8:38-39, “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Amen!