



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, August 9, 2020
The Tenth Sunday After Pentecost

Solemn Eucharist

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Adam Spencer, *Associate for Pastoral Care*
on
Matthew 14:22-33
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A Lonely Place

It's officially been 2020 for 15 years now.

Or it feels that way anyway. And friends, I don't know about you but I'm not doing so well in this pandemic. I can pretend, I can put on a good face. But I'm not at one hundred percent. The isolation from friends and family, the distance from all of you, the cancellation or postponement of normal life, of events and vacations that we were looking forward to, and the constant level of tension and apprehension saying nothing of the feeling of spending most of my days on Zoom. We all are, on some level, I think experiencing low grade trauma and grief. Human beings are not supposed to live like this. And I am one of the lucky ones. The ones who aren't infected, the ones who haven't died. I still have a job. I can still support my family. But this strange existence continues - this blend of isolation and anxiety, dread and powerlessness. There's no end in sight either and all of it, all of it, has worn me down. I'm feeling more than a little burned out these days. In my spirit, in my heart. I'm weary deep down inside. And I know I'm not alone in that.

So of course God gives me this text to preach on today.

God has a fantastic sense of humor. It's one of his best and least appreciated qualities.

Because, as we find him today at the beginning of our Gospel text: Jesus was, perhaps, feeling burnt out too.

He sent everyone away - the disciples and the crowds. After a long day of teaching and healing and feeding thousands, he sent them all away. Jesus told his disciples to get in the boat and row across to the other side, he dismissed the crowds and he climbed up a nearby hillside to be alone.

The thing about reading Scripture in the Sunday lectionary is that we lose its wider narrative context. We get these manageable, bite-sized morsels. A neat little story, a parable or two. But we don't read what happened in the story right before we pick it up and we don't see what comes next. So it might not be apparent why Jesus needed to be alone. Or just how desperately he might have needed it.

At the beginning of the 14th chapter of Matthew's Gospel, 21 verses before today's text, we learn of the death of John the Baptist. And it isn't a peaceful death. It is gory and grotesque. John is imprisoned for speaking out against King Herod. And then at a banquet, to appease his pretty young niece, King Herod has

John the Baptist beheaded and his head paraded around the dinner party on a platter - like the boar's head at a Renaissance feast. It's a horrifying story if you let the imagery seep past our comfortable familiarity with it. It is bloody and it is brutal.

John was Jesus's cousin. Mary went to visit John's mother Elizabeth when they both were pregnant. And so I don't think it is an extraordinary leap of the imagination to picture these two little boys playing together in the dusty streets of their small Galilean towns perhaps unaware of portentous destinies ahead of them both. John's ministry preceded his younger cousin's and probably influenced it. Jesus's forerunner, as the tradition calls him. But also his cousin. Likely his boyhood friend. Now brutally murdered.

The news is brought to Jesus, Matthew tells us. And, hearing the news, Jesus gets in a boat and pilots it to "a lonely place apart" as the Revised Standard Version puts it. To pray. To grieve. Perhaps to cope with what his cousin's death means for him and his ministry. The shadow of the Cross falling over his little boat. The weight of it all crashing in on him.

But Jesus is interrupted. The crowds, from last week's Gospel text, come to him from the surrounding towns. Even out on the lake in a boat by himself, he can't get a moment's peace. He can't escape the crowds with their needs and hopes and desires. And so he pushes his sorrow and stress away and he comes ashore, filled with his characteristic compassion, to multiply the loaves and the fishes. And that brings us to our story today. Jesus sending the crowds and the disciples away after that powerful miracle.

The popular theological imagination sees Jesus, except maybe in the Garden of Gethsemane, except maybe on the Cross, as kind of superheroic. And our tradition gives us plenty of tools to construct and ratify that image of him. He is, after all, God, right? So it's easy to imagine that he's above it all somehow. Not subject to the mess of human psychology like you or me. He doesn't struggle like us or grieve like us. He's Jesus, after all. But our tradition also claims, stridently in fact, that Jesus was fully human. A real flesh and blood, historical, emotional, psychological person. And real people, at least the ones I know, struggle, and grieve, and feel worn out and weary. We see Jesus weep at his friend Lazarus's tomb. Is it so hard to imagine him weeping here, worn out from the incessant, never-ending demands of the crowd, aching and mourning and perhaps afraid because of John's execution, burned out and on his last nerve and feeling like he just really needs to be alone?

I can imagine the weight on his shoulders, the tension in his muscles, the headache perhaps, the heartache for sure, the bone-deep weariness and the distressed heaviness in his chest. Because I have felt it and I'm sure at least some of you have too. Perhaps you are feeling it right now. And maybe here, finally alone on the hilltop, Jesus falls to his knees, or slumps down against a rock or a tree and lets out a sigh that tells the whole story. A sigh too deep for words.

I found myself sighing like that, five years ago, up on the seventh floor of Rush Hospital in Chicago. I felt utterly wiped out. Depleted. Done. I was in the midst of a summer of hospital chaplaincy and a twenty-four hour on-call shift, and it was two in the morning. I'd just rushed from baptizing a baby that almost died in the NICU to the room of a man coding from a heart failure to a darkened bedside to sit beside the young wife of a guy dying by inches night by night and now I had finally settled down back in the on-call room to try and sleep.

I couldn't sleep. Life itself, life outside the hospital seemed too much for me. I was fighting bitterly with a dear friend about something stupid. I had a major paper due in one of my classes at seminary and I had writer's block. Finances at home were tight because the hospital work didn't pay very well. I felt distant from my wife, Rose, because of the insane schedule I'd been keeping. I was doubting my calling to ordained ministry in the face of never-ending diocesan delays. My body was tired, I was emotionally weary, and I knew that if that pager went off again I'd have to go back down there into that hospital and face even more death and illness and grief. I had nothing left in the gas tank. One more thing going wrong in my world,

one more demand on me that night would have snapped me in half. All I wanted to do was rest. And yet I couldn't sleep. So I got up and I read the Bible. My wise and canny spiritual director had assigned two readings as part of our working through the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola. I'd been told to read this story from today's Gospel and the other story of Jesus calming the Sea of Galilee. And taking some time that night, alone in that room, reading these stories of Jesus showing up amidst stress and peril gave me some unexpected comfort. Imagining the scenes and placing myself within them. Envisioning Jesus coming to me, walking across the stormy seas of that 2 am sleepless night, calming the tempest in my life in the way he stilled the angry sea. Jesus speaking to the chaos of the middle of the night in the hospital and in my heart and telling me that he had my back. That we'd be alright. Now, I still couldn't sleep. But I felt a little bit strengthened. I felt ever so slightly more able to handle things. Not completely. Not heroically. But enough. Enough to carry on.

I wonder if Jesus had a similar experience on that hilltop, as the winds of the gathering storm began to howl. The Church teaches that Jesus is the Second Person of the Trinity. The Son of God. But what does that mean in practice in a human life? We can't know how the interplay of divine and human worked itself out in his psychological life, in his experiences of stress and grief. But I wonder if it wasn't why he continued to seek out lonely places to pray. Because despite the evidence in his heart and in his world, Jesus' deepest identity was not as a scared or weary or grieving man alone on a hilltop and doomed to be brutally killed like John was. His deepest identity was divine. Intimately related to the Father, full of the Spirit. And these solitary occasions of prayer - the desert, the garden, this lonely hilltop - interrupted as they so often were, were those times where he grounded himself in that fuller identity. Where he re-connected with the deep places in himself. Where he replenished his depleted inner resources. Where he found the strength to carry on.

In this moment of our common life, when the pandemic and its attendant crises have us feeling exhausted and threadbare and deprived of those very things that make us feel most human. We need to pause. We need to attend to our souls. To re-connect with our inner life. No one will make the time for us. We are, most of us, already in a lonely place. Now we need to take time apart. Now we need to pray. We need to rest in the embrace of the divine. We stand upon it in our very being, our mere existence. God is always with you. But it requires effort, attention, devotion to rest in that presence, to draw strength from those deep reserves. We must tend our inner life like a garden, we must be kind and intentional towards our souls. Self-care isn't a fluffy luxury. It's essential. Jesus practiced it. For me this practice looks like praying with the Scriptures, walking in the woods, spending time with God in silence. For other people this will mean journaling or talking honestly about their lives with a good and trusted friend or watching a favorite movie, reading some poetry or listening to music. Our souls are hurting, weary, battered whether we're immediately conscious of it or not. We need to attend to them. Regularly. Desperately.

As the prophet Isaiah says, "In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength."

Jesus tells everyone to go away. And, alone, he is not alone. He is grounded. He is re-connected. He is re-centered. Amidst his pain and grief, his anxiety and fear. He finds what he needs to carry on.

And as the winds rise and the storm gathers again, he remembers that he can, in fact, walk on water.