

Missing Jesus
Sermon 155 | Greystone Baptist Church | October 9, 2022
Matthew 14:22-33

Long, long ago, in the days before MapQuest and GPS directions, my friend, Emily, and I took a trip to her Aunt's house on Wadmalaw Island, South Carolina. It was the end of a grueling semester of graduate study and we were in need of the beauty and respite this vacation home promised. We didn't leave early enough to make it to the house before dark but we had the directions written by Emily's Magical Aunt Susan herself. With her exquisite use of descriptive language, these were no ordinary turn by turn directions. This was award-worthy narrative prose, a beautiful plan for how our car would make the journey from Winston-Salem to Wadmalaw Island without a single wrong turn. We were not worried in the least as our car bellowed down the highway with us singing our hearts out to the latest album by *the Chicks* and dreaming about the low country sanctuary that awaited our arrival.

The hours passed and the sun went down. We drove on. As the landscape flattened we began to notice the headlights illuminating the lowest limbs of live oak trees which lined the now two-lane highway. They were strung up with Spanish moss like divinely crafted tinsel carefully placed on each branch in just the right spot.

Following the directions still, we turned off the highway onto a narrowing road. Our surroundings seemed to be getting darker, though I am sure the headlights on the car were still shining. There were no more landmarks, businesses, or residences, only the curves of the road and the hope that we were nearing our destination. I looked at my phone. No cell service. And perhaps having seen too many episodes on true crime, I began to worry. Where in the world were we? Had we missed a turn? Taken the wrong course? How would we get out of this without even being able to call and ensure we were still on the right path?

Just before my worry got the best of me, Emily slowed down and turned off the road. The headlights pointed toward the slightest opening by a tree just off the road. "I think this is it!" She said as she re-read the directions. "Take a left at the solitary pine." (Remember what I said about the directions?)

I looked but couldn't see anything that resembled a driveway. Honestly, to me it just looked like we were about to take her Altima off-roading through someone's undeveloped property.

Slowly, she pressed the gas and the car moved forward, hitting every bump and bouncing down the path - which I was certain led to trouble.

Surely this is how the disciples felt when Jesus sent them on ahead in the boat while he retreated to pray. Surely they were all tired from the long days of traveling, teaching, healing and feeding. Surely they too wanted to find a quiet spot to pause, reflect and just *be* with God. But Jesus made them get into the boat and go on to the other side.

Maybe the seas were calm at first, and the gentle back and forth of the water rocked them to sleep. But in the wee hours of the morning, imagine between 3 and 6 am, they were awake and afraid as the boat became battered by the waves.

“Where is Jesus now?” They probably cried out. Wouldn’t you?

Isn’t that what we say when the life-boats to which we cling are wind-tossed and wave-torn? Where are you God? And why aren’t you here?

Then a figure appears walking atop the lake; and again they cry out in fear. Wiping their eyes which are still fresh from rest (we all know the feeling). Surely not now, surely not this, we are already struggling, tired and afraid - and now this too?

But just before these feelings would overcome, the figure speaks from the surface of the deep and the disciples know exactly who it is. Peter knows so well he doesn’t ask “Who is there?” but seeks confirmation by asking Jesus to ask him to get out of the boat! “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” (v.28) The word “if” being the same word for “since” (Lord, *since* it is you...)

Read that way, it sounds like Peter knew that it was Jesus and he was expecting Jesus to ask him to do the dangerous and difficult thing. Peter knew from his own experience that Jesus *always* beckons us to get out of the boat.

It only makes sense, really, because we know that discipleship means following Jesus. Wherever Jesus goes, there the disciples go also. And, we already know Jesus to be the one who walks on the water. He *is* after all the incarnate iteration of the God who made the water, then separated it from dry land. This is the same God who parted the water of the Red Sea in the Exodus story. God reigns over the water and so if anyone is going to walk *on* the water, wouldn’t it make sense that it would be God incarnate? Wouldn’t that be just like God?

But what about Peter? He is not divine, he is just a man. A man being asked to do the impossible, how is he going to follow Jesus out there?

Before he has time to work it all out in his rational mind, Peter’s actions challenge the laws of nature as he steps out in faith, trusting that somehow, some way, this would all be worth it. He is after all headed toward the arms of Jesus.

I’d like to pause the Biblical story here just for a moment so that we can fully appreciate what is happening. Taken literally, we enter this story at safe distance. We are on dry land. We are in 2022 in the United States of America, not on the shores of ancient Galilee. We are well fed, removed from the crowds, and not requiring any sailing skills - at least not for right now.

Maybe we should go ahead and say that we are following Jesus in a more of a spiritual sense than a literal one.

But even within the distance provided by this disclaimer, while we may like to think it, the truth of the matter is, we are not safe. Followers of Jesus never are because, ours is a God who beckons us to get out of the boat. Ours is a God who calls us to challenge everything - even gravity itself - so that we can brave the waves that are battering the boats we are in - and walk toward Jesus.

In many ways, much of life can be summed up in this ancient vignette. We can remember the moments when Jesus felt close, when we witnessed a miracle or felt an undeniable closeness of God. And then, long before we were ready, a storm started brewing, and waves of brokenness, failure, grief, anxiety, stress, depression, loneliness and worry battered us beyond recognition. In the midst of these storms we - much like the disciples - have known all too well what it means to search for God, we have broken down and wondered why God wasn't there with us when we needed God the most.

Maybe we [even] feel like that today.

Maybe we are missing Jesus, missing the presence of God in our life, in our struggles, in our storms and we are throwing up our hands and asking, "Why aren't you here now?" "Where are you?" "Why have you gone away?"

Returning to the Gospel we find Peter who has summoned the strength to step out on faith. As he does, he is miraculously able to walk on water. With his focus on God, he can brave the storm, he can defy the laws of nature, he can do what God is trying to do in the world - but when his focus returns to the storm swirling around, to the wind, the rain, the waves, the beating that he is taking as he walks, when his focus shifts from God's activity to the storms that make it hard, Peter begins to sink... and so will we.

All those years ago, when Emily's car turned off the road and took the path by the solitary pine, I was full of doubt, certain that something awful was about to happen. All of my lived experience, and every driver's ed class I ever took told me that staying on the road, the well beaten path (so to speak) was the only way to ensure safety. But there we were, braving uncharted territory with some beautifully crafted directions and the promise that our end-of-semester sanctuary was indeed up ahead, just out of sight. We just needed faith enough to stay the course.

Sure enough, after a few moments of bouncing down that dirt pathway, a beautiful cottage emerged like the extended hand of Jesus reaching out to grab Peter just seconds before he sank beneath the waves.

This week as I have immersed myself in this story I noticed for the first time (probably because of the series and the theme for today, *Missing Jesus*) I noticed for the first time that Jesus isn't missing at all. Jesus is exactly where we should expect him to be, if we have been paying attention at all. Jesus isn't missing, we (like the disciples) are missing Jesus.

You see, the disciples are in the thick of the storm. They are doing what they were told to do, they were trying their best to follow directions and trouble came anyway. But God - the same God who according to Philippians 2, took on human form, becoming one of us, one with us, has not abandoned the disciples in their time of need, no, God is exactly where we should expect God to be... alive in the person of Jesus, suffering and struggling with and through the very storms that bear down on the disciples.

As I read the text again and again this week it became so clear that God is not missing, Jesus is not missing, in fact, Jesus and Peter are literally and physically connected by the water and air of the storm. They are joined and united by the storm itself. Jesus has not abandoned them, Jesus has entered their storm and their struggle.

This came as a revelation to me, but it shouldn't have because this is exactly what an incarnate God who's constant motivation is love would do. This is what love looks like.

But that is not all.

If Jesus is indeed the way... If Jesus is our model, our hope and our salvation, then we must receive not only the promise, but also the call of this text. We can no longer follow Jesus in just the spiritual sense, at some point we also must live it! God is calling us to get out of our boats and take a faithful step forward.

So... The promise is that God is with us in our storms... we are never alone. And the call is the same. God is with us in our storms and as followers of Jesus as lovers of God, we too must enter the waves and the wind. We too must take the risk of stepping into the storms that blow into our own lives and also those that belong to others, storms that swirl and batter and threaten to steal their very lives - we must follow Jesus into those storms as living, literal, embodied hope where all seems to be lost.

Jesus isn't missing, we are missing Jesus.

If we are to find Jesus and follow him, we have to become a hand stretched out, ready to pull a sister up from the rising water, saying, "do not worry, you are not alone, we will weather this storm together." Yes, it is risky. Yes, it is scary. Yes, it is unprecedented, and at times it seems wholly impossible. But just imagine the possibilities if we all began to brave the storms together, with one another and with God. Just imagine the church actually becoming the body of Christ in this world - not only spiritually, but also literally, stepping out beyond the safety of the boats we built for ourselves and onto the waves that are battering and beating and bearing down on the people all around this world.

Yes, it is scary and dangerous and risky... But can't you just see it? Won't faith allow us to imagine and envision the beauty of the church becoming the extended arm of God's grace piercing through the storms?

Can we imagine? Can we see it just up ahead? Can we become it?