

Into the Tumult

Wayne Waibel – 08/09/2020

Water has always been a very powerful symbol in creation. It separates land masses on earth. It drops from above and extends into depths of the globe that remain unexplored to this very day. In the ancient world it was viewed largely as a force for evil. Then Christ came along and demonstrated on multiple occasions that God Almighty could overcome even the ominous seas.

Humankind came by their fear of water naturally. From the great flood of Noah's day, through the parting of the Red Sea to cover Israel's great escape, to the swollen river Jordan marking entry into the promised land – water was and is a force to be reckoned with.

As a sailor, I can speak with authority when I say the single most important aspect to life at sea is watertight integrity. You breach that integrity and you are sunk. Quite literally. You're going down.

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Today's passage in Matthew marks the first reference to Jesus Himself at prayer. "He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray." In antiquity, mountains were considered places of contact between heaven and earth. Christ's isolation on a mountain contrasts the unbelief in His homeland and the heinous imperial world.

The ruling elite in Palestine had all but eliminated the Torah and in its place inserted volumes of man-made doctrine that governed the proper way to live a Godly life. Compound that with Herod's renowned brutality towards the common folk and you have a world that caused Jesus great pain and anguish. It's of little wonder He found the need to get away by Himself from time to time. This section of Matthew functions almost exclusively to emphasize Jesus' isolation from the world. "He was there alone."

Sitting at the bottom of a waterless pit gave Joseph plenty of time to ponder the trajectory of his young life. Perhaps he could see how his being so openly favored by his father Israel over his older brothers, coupled with his arrogant boasting of his dreams may have led to his dire predicament. As we will see in the coming weeks, Joseph's maturity manifests in some remarkable outcomes.

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Arguably the single most identified trait to explain the chronic depression that envelopes life on earth in this time - is loneliness. We are a broken people for sure, but beyond that, it's very rare to find anyone that actually seeks aloneness. We just don't see the value in it any longer. People need people.

The pandemic has certainly done its part in deepening that loneliness and isolation, turning it into a matter of survival. For those who prefer not to be alone – this is a particularly devastating time. Loneliness itself can be very tumultuous.

A strong faith will go a long way in making one feel less alone. But try telling that to someone who is sitting alone in their room at a care facility that allows only the occasional visit from a loved one through a windowed door. I am hearing various reports that these folks are finding a lot of comfort in the Bible.

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When it comes to Scripture, a fuller understanding of its meaning grows out of its interpretation over time. That's why we keep reading it over and over and over again. If you're like most people, you find little nuggets of wisdom in passages that made little sense previously. So, we read on.

Take today's story from Matthew for example. My original sermon title was "Don't Get Out of the Boat?" alluding to Peter's lack of faith causing him to flounder. The first impression I had was, "For crying out loud, man – you're not Jesus Christ – the waves are monstrous – stay in the boat!" Upon further review, however, a closer look at the demeanor of Jesus reveals something else entirely. The sea rages, and He is calm. The disciples cry out in fear, Jesus says, "Be of good cheer. It is I; do not be afraid." Peter in his arrogant rush to doubt asks for verification. Jesus calmly and succinctly beckons, "Come."

Jesus wants us to leave the boat. He wants for us the kind of faith that will sustain and protect even into the tumult. This story starts in terror, but ends in worship. "Truly You are the Son of God."

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Focusing on the presence of Jesus dispels fear. This awesome vision in the midst of a storm is intended as good news. It is not intended to terrorize or diminish, but to save, uphold and establish. "Do not be afraid" is a keynote of the gospel itself.

We are called to step out in faith even in the midst of troubled waters. There will be high anxiety – there will be fear, but there will also be Jesus – He will not abandon us. Each one of you is stepping out in faith today by your desire to worship at a time and in a place that are specifically cautioned against. And I'll bet to a person – you are focused more on Christ than your own fear of becoming ill. And I am humbled, honored, proud and grateful to be among you. Your courage and faithfulness inform my own.

Discipleship is a risky business, but so exciting – and precisely what God calls us to do and be. We may not be able to change anything, but faith can change everything. Evangelism in its truest form is nothing more than introducing others to Jesus. Let Him take it from there. Jesus lived the life the Torah was designed to create. Not sure how our Jewish neighbors would hear that statement, but I don't have their historical reference – or lens. To us – Christ replaced the law as the way to salvation.

Jesus calls us to live with love, honesty and humility. It is not up to us to save the world. God has already done that. If a sniveling little tattler like Joseph can rise to become the savior of the entire house of Israel, it's not unthinkable that each of us may be destined to lead an impactful life. For those that feel they lack faith in our time, it is probably because they're not doing anything that requires it. So, I would say to them, "Go ahead – take a leap – stride confidently into the tumult – see what happens." Amen.