

Sermon: On Being Unmoored**Scripture: Matthew 14:22-33****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: August 13, 2017**

A narcissistic, megalomaniac, thin-skinned bully with way too much power, in charge of one of the greatest superpowers of the day I think you know to whom I refer – King Herod of 1st century Palestine! And he had just topped his cruelest of acts. There was a most beloved leader of the people of Israel, a folk hero who spoke hope and encouragement to the despairing and the powerless, but who had gotten on Herod's bad side... well, really on the bad side of one of Herod's family members, but there was this weird enmeshment of Herod's rule and his family (can you imagine?) and so at a royal celebration, a Roman festival with music, dancing and laughter, John the Baptist was executed, his head brought to Herod's wife on a plate.

The people were devastated, for so much of their hope of a better future lay with John the Baptist. And just like that, he was dead and brutally so. The people couldn't stay in their own homes and villages in the face of such news but had to get out and gather together and so they went looking for the other man, whose name was becoming quite known in those parts, the one that even John seemed in awe of – Jesus, from the town of Nazareth. Once they had found him out near the Sea of Galilee, they gathered on the hillside, eager to hear what word he might have for them, what advice – should they rise up and rebel against Herod's tyranny, should they leave Palestine and seek refuge in some other country, what should they do? Jesus too felt grief at John's loss and such tenderness at how lost the people seemed and so he healed

some of their sick and simply encouraged them to eat together and when they seemed not to have enough to eat, he performed a miracle so that over 5000 of them could stay and eat together.

It was later that night that Jesus sent his disciples on across the Sea of Galilee while he went to a quiet place to pray. And while the disciples were out in the boat the wind began to rip and the waves swelled and buffeted the boat terribly. They found themselves in a little boat in the middle of a roiling sea; a physical illustration of the roiling chaos of the time and they were desperate losing their strength and their hope and their direction? They were victims of much greater forces than they could manage, be that the wind and the sea, or Herod and the Roman Empire.

But suddenly there was Jesus. In the midst of it all. Where he couldn't possibly be. There in the middle of the sea with them, walking across the chaos of the wind and waves as a still small point of calm. It freaked the disciples out, actually, but Peter with his eyes trained on Jesus, through all that chaos released his white-knuckled grip on the side of the boat, stepped over the side and onto the water to get to Jesus. As long as his eyes and the eyes of his heart were trained on Jesus he was fine and when he got distracted and fell from his reverie and realized that he was actually doing something that was impossible to do and the fear came flooding back in, he had made himself vulnerable enough so that when Jesus reached out his hand, he could take hold of him and save him. Had he remained frozen in the pitching boat, desperately clutching the gunwale, his hands would not have been free to grab Jesus' outstretched hand; good ole Peter so full of folly but also courage. He stepped out of his little boat.

We fear at times, don't we, that we will sink beneath the weight of life and so we create vessels for ourselves within which we can live and move and have our being as safely and controlled as possible. Especially those of us of greater means will do this with the insurance we buy, the savings and investments we collect, the towns we tuck into, the things we surround ourselves with, so most eventualities are covered in some way or another and we are convinced that to do otherwise is down right irresponsible. But what can be lost with white knuckle living, is the practice of trust and faith in something greater than ourselves. What can be lost is our awareness of the true need we have for the other, both the human-neighbor other and the Divine Other, God.

And so from the safety of our little boats, we look out at the rough and chaotic sea and the people drowning out there and we ponder and even argue if there is a God at all as we cling to our little boats. But interestingly for those drowning out there - if we ever for some reason or another get bucked out of the boat and find ourselves in the midst of the raging waters with them - the experience is often not "where is God in all of this" but a remarkable confirmation that God is very real and thankfully so cause otherwise all would be sunk.

There are a lot of boat metaphors available to us - When we lived in Vermont, near Lake Champlain, we were given a little 16 foot O'Day Sail Boat which we passed on to another little family up there when we moved. We kept it moored out at Converse Bay on Lake Champlain and I wasn't exactly a seasoned sailor by any means, but learned as I went and came to love it. Some days I would go out there just for the afternoon by myself, row a little dingy out to the boat, and get everything set for a couple hours of sailing. If it was really windy that

particular day, and Lake Champlain can get really windy, there was a heightened level of anxiety for me – you know what they say about sailing – “hours and hours of relaxation punctuated by moments of pure terror!” Well, I felt that at times. And so when it was really windy, such that I probably shouldn’t have been out there by myself, there was this moment when I would stand there in the boat looking at the bow line attached to the mooring and I had hold of the main sheet and I knew the minute I yanked that line to extend the sails the full length of the mast that the wind would start slapping that sail intensely and I’d have just a moment of time to race to the front of the boat, unclip from the mooring and clip it to the dingy so it would stay there, and then jump back to the main sheet and tiller and navigate myself into the wind so that I could sail out of and away from in between the boats safely, also lowering the rudder once I was far enough out for it not to hit ground! When I finally got away from the other boats with rudder down and the sail positioned so that the wind filled the sails and propelled me forward... there was no better feeling the world than that initial cruising out into the middle of lake – the sail going quiet and the hull keeling up and cutting through the water and the journey begun.

But still there was a moment , when I was standing there in a safely moored boat that I would think to myself, maybe it’s a little too much for me today and you know this isn’t so bad just staying safely moored. I could just sit here, sun a little bit, and swim out from the boat and enjoy myself here. Then I know I’d be safe, then there’s be no way I could hit another boat or keel over or get caught in a later afternoon storm and I know all would be well. But of course then so much was lost by staying moored...

If any of us have been wondering where God is in our lives right now, could it be that we are too clutched to the gunwales of our little moored life boat such that if we have a sense of God he's at best a phantasm who might be out there somewhere? Could it be that we need to step over the boat and out into the sea? Could it be that we need to risk the unmooring so that we will be dependent upon some higher power to guide us and fill our sails? If we are asking "where is God in all of this" could it be that we have been unwilling to truly throw up the sails of our lives to catch the wind of the Spirit because we are fearful for where the winds of the Spirit might sweep us off to! How narrow we make ourselves and our paths and how disconnected from God if we are determined to remain safe and in control of it all.

But what if our safe harbor is not a place or the things around us or the peace of positive events – all of which are fleeting and not guaranteed but what if our safe harbor was the ever-present Spirit of Christ. No matter the chaos around, Peter for a moment trained his eye upon Christ and for him all other anxiety and concern was secondary. He was in no safe harbor but found the safe harbor through Jesus was in him.

Especially in this day and age of division, violence and chaos, it is so important to keep our eyes on Christ so that whatever craziness this world brings we remain harbored in God and our sails filled with the movement of Spirit and love, for world's sake, amen!