

The scripture reading this morning is from the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 6, verses 45-56.

This story occurs immediately after Jesus fed the crowd of 5,000 people on 5 loaves, of bread I assume, and 2 fish, with his disciples looking on in amazement.

⁴⁵ Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. ⁴⁶ After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray.

⁴⁷ Later that night, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on land. ⁴⁸ He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them. Shortly before dawn he went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them, ⁴⁹ but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out, ⁵⁰ because they all saw him and were terrified.

Immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." ⁵¹ Then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were completely amazed, ⁵² for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened.

⁵³ When they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret and anchored there. ⁵⁴ As soon as they got out of the boat, people recognized Jesus. ⁵⁵ They ran throughout that whole region and carried the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. ⁵⁶ And wherever he went—into villages, towns or countryside—they placed the sick in the marketplaces. They begged him to let them touch even the edge of his cloak, and all who touched it were healed.

At first reading I wondered what this story has to do with our summer theme of Time. But it didn't take long for the time element to creep in. How much time elapsed between "late night" and "shortly before dawn", for example? Then, there's the time Jesus took to go up on a mountainside to pray. Imagine how much time would have elapsed if he'd gone all the way to the top!

It's the first time slot that spoke to me because that's the slot with the disciples straining at their oars to get their boat to its destination. Even if it had been sunset when Jesus gave the instruction to get in the boat, you still have the hours leading up to "later that night" and whatever time elapsed between then and "shortly before dawn." And even if the winds weren't at full howl the entire time, we're looking at time measured in hours of straining at the oars, not minutes.

Made me wonder, how long do we struggle with our problems before we perceive the help that is right there?

I was tempted to come down on them for not recognizing their teacher, the person they'd been following for some time. But, really, can you blame them? You're out there on the water? Exhausted from all the struggle? And you see what looks like a ghost? Has to be a ghost, no one walks on water! No, I'm with them.

Where I so relate to them is perhaps the part of the story we are not told. Were they calling out for help? Maybe not. Who would hear them? Were they praying to God to send aid? Or were they so afraid of capsizing that praying never even occurred to them? Were they reciting any one of the many psalms with words just right for desperate situations?

If they're like I am, ... maybe not. I get so tangled up in whatever problem is before me, trying to think my way to calmer waters, that I spend night after night tossing around on the rough seas of my mind. My very bed has no rest for me.

I remember one such time. I was well into a very intense music job, here in Boston, 9-12 hour days end-to-end before the festival started, then a complex schedule for the week of the festival. And my husband was in the hospital at MGH. I was beside myself with exhaustion and worry. As I sat on my bed one morning hardly able to move, a voice piped up in side, "Anyone would agree with you that this is a terrible situation. That's a fact. But guess what? You have the power to make it worse! Yes, worse. By thinking constantly about how bad it is. Better for you to just try to get

through it somehow, then when it's all over, that's when you think about how to keep this from happening again." Relief.

Those of us who derive comfort from framing life experiences in terms of a relationship with our triune God will say, "Hmmm, nice little intervention there, Holy Spirit! Good save!"

And then, staying with the story's metaphor, there are the times when friends walk on water. I have experienced it. 20 years ago, I was tossed about on the rough seas of grief, barely able to look up, but when I did, there was a hand from one or another of the flock at CCW reaching out to offer comfort and companionship. I'm quite sure that most of you have been that hand for one or another of this flock. You have for me already. So, yes. You walk on water. Think about that.

There was a lot about Jesus the disciples just couldn't grasp. Perhaps this experience happened early in their exposure to Jesus. They had not yet realized what an anchor Jesus' way could be. And they certainly had not yet been introduced to the Advocate, the Spirit that would be with them after Jesus ascended into Heaven. They were so amazed at the external manifestations, the miracles, the feeding of 5,000 with very limited supplies, the healing, -- and a few confusing parables thrown in. There was so much to wonder about, they can be forgiven if they hadn't reached the question of what all this really meant for their lives. Hasn't humanity has been trying to make sense of that ever since Jesus walked the earth? Maybe the reason we don't look up in the midst of our struggles is that we have not fully taken in what Jesus tried to show us about God. Maybe the lesson here is that when the going gets tough, Jesus has already walked over to us, in the form of a relief-giving realization, or in the form of a friend walking on water to hold out a hand, a friend whose mere presence calms the rough seas.