

Today the Gospel reading from Matthew we hear the familiar story of Jesus walking across the rough waves to the disciples in boat. Peter is invited to come to Jesus but becomes fearful. Once Jesus and Peter return to the boat the storm ceases.

So often when we hear and reflect on today's gospel readings and its parallel story of Jesus calming the waves earlier in Matthew 8 – we focus on our faith in Jesus who calms the storms if only we have faith. But when we hone in on this part of the story we miss the wider image and message. In this story, as with the other, Jesus only calms the waves after he sends the disciples out into it!

The text says that Jesus made the disciples get into the boat (14:22). A better translation would be “to force” or “to compel.” Jesus did not give the disciples a choice. He made them to get into the boat and to leave him alone with the crowds.

Jesus stays on the mountain to pray. While Jesus is alone talking with God, the disciples find themselves in a life-threatening situation. The disciples have been struggling to keep afloat for a while. Jesus does not come till the early morning hours - while it is still dark.

The disciples, though, do not initially recognize Jesus in the midst of the chaos. They have been alone with the threatening waves for hours. They are probably tired from being up all night. In the midst of this crisis when their energy reserves are gone, Jesus reveals himself to them.

In Matthew's Gospel, this story is meant to reveal who Jesus is. And that revelation is possible in the midst of the chaos. If Jesus had not forced the disciples to embark on this uncertain journey, they would have missed the opportunity to see God revealed in their midst.

Now this doesn't mean that we need to enter tumult or fearful events to have God revealed to us – but it is true that it often when we are outside our comfort zone that we do recognise who God is and where God is

We learn about ourselves and our God through our interactions with others and world. Our life, our memories, our experiences, individually and collectively make us who we are! We are more aware than ever at present that there is brokenness in our world – but this does not mean God is not with us, rather we are invited to find God in all that is going on.

In many ways the heart of this story is fear. We all experience fear – though we don't often talk about that fear, or acknowledge that that is our motivation – even to ourselves.

Peter doesn't just flounder in the water because he takes his eyes off of Jesus, but because he grows afraid. And, quite frankly, that fear is justified. It's a storm, raging powerfully enough to sink the boat, let alone drown a single person. He has perfectly good reason to be afraid.

And so do we! Whether it's a fear relating to the Pandemic, or the return of illness. Or fear of loneliness after loss, of what holds You name it, there is a lot for us as individuals, or as a community that can make us afraid. And that fear can be debilitating. It sneaks up on us and makes it difficult to move forward at all, let alone with confidence. Fear, in short, is one of the primary things that robs the children of God of the abundant life God intends for us, and for this reason many scholars encourage us to take Jesus' words to the disciples near the end of the passage (v. 31) more as lament than as rebuke¹.

Fear is a part of our lives, and we should take care that being fearful is not equated with faithlessness. Courage, after all, isn't the absence of fear but the ability to stand and do what needs to be done even when we're afraid².

This is the promise at the heart of this story, all of Matthew's Gospel, and indeed of our faith: that God is with us – despite all that we might fear or have to face.

Or as Jesus reminded the disciples 'take heart' and grab hold! Amen.

¹ <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/08/pentecost-10-a-something-more/>

² <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/08/pentecost-10-a-something-more/>