

Going It Afraid

February 7, 2021

Bendersville and Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Matthew 14:13-33

Today we are continuing to work our way through some of the high points – some of the big stories – of Matthew’s gospel. For those of you who are joining us maybe for the first time this week,

- we started at the beginning of the year with the story of the Wise Men following a star toward goodness-knows-what, when they were suddenly met by a joy that they were not expecting.
- We looked at the story of Jesus’s cousin John the Baptist, preaching repentance and paving the way for Jesus, only to find himself confused and amazed when Jesus comes, ready to change and to grow.
- We saw Jesus in the desert – in the wilderness – struggling, for the very first time, with his own deepest longings and temptations.
- We saw Jesus at the very beginning of his ministry, preaching a word of profound hope to the weary and the sick and the destitute – a word of blessing. Essentially “the world may have forgotten you, but God – God sees you. And God calls you blessed.”
- And then last week we jumped over a bunch of chapters and landed in Matthew 13, a chapter full of stories – 7 of them, to be exact. Seven parables, pictures, images, of what the kingdom of heaven is all about. “In the kingdom of heaven,” Jesus tells us, “I will restore all things. I will root out everything inside of you that is killing you, so that the only thing left will be a beautiful and bountiful harvest. And when it doesn’t seem like there is anything left there – when it feels like your faith is only hanging on by a thread and your hope is running thin – know that just a tiny little bit – the smallest of seeds and the tiniest grains of yeast are all that it takes for God to grow you into something beautiful.

And then, in the next chapter – chapter 14, which we are reading part of today – we really begin to see that theme come alive. But in an unexpected way.

Because at the beginning of chapter 14, crisis hits. Do you remember back 4 weeks ago, when we talked about John the Baptist, and talked about this really cool, special relationship that John and Jesus had that even went back to the time the two of them were in utero? John recognized something special in Jesus, before the two of them were even born. And when John was out in the desert preaching, he knew that Jesus was someone special. The one who he had spent his whole life pointing to. These two cousins were thick as thieves. And they shared a deep mutual love and affection for each other.

So here at the beginning of chapter 14, we see a nightmare unfolding. A juicy, scandalous nightmare. It actually has the makings of a wildly-successful 1st century TV drama. Here's what's going on. King Herod had the hots for his sister-in-law, his brother's wife. And she had the hots for him. But John the Baptist stepped in and said, "no, Herod, you can't have her. She's off-limits. She's married. *To your brother.*"

Well, the king didn't like this, and so he got mad and threw John the Baptist in prison. No sooner had he done this than he lost interest in his sister-in-law but then became infatuated with his niece – his brother and sister-in-law's daughter – when she got all dolled up at a party and danced provocatively for him. He decided that he wanted to give his beautiful niece a lavish gift – anything she wanted. So she and her mother (who was still mad that John the Baptist wouldn't let her have her brother-in-law the king) – she and her mother colluded together to ask King Herod for John the Baptist's head on a platter. And he obliged.

So the disciples got word about what had happened, and they came and took John's body and gave it a proper burial. And then they had the horrible task of breaking the awful news to Jesus, that his favorite and closest cousin was dead.

Understandably, Jesus was crushed. He had been on a roll, telling one story after another, after another; spelling out for the people the amazing beauties of the kingdom of God; but when he gets this news, he is dumbstruck. He has no words left to speak. And in his grief, he does what so many of us do when we are grieving: He withdrew to spend some time by himself. To be alone with his sadness and pain. To take care of himself during this tender and grief-stricken time – because when we are grieving there usually isn't a whole lot of space or energy for anybody else. That was the case for Jesus too. He needed a little bit of time alone, so that he could catch his breath and shed some tears.

But unfortunately for him, the crowds of people just won't leave him alone. They follow him. They press in on him. They need more from him. They want more stories. More assurance. More of him. And there is just no more of him to give, at least not right now.

But because he is Jesus, full of compassion, he sets his own grief on the shelf just for a little while so that he can heal the sick who come to him.

By this point, the disciples have pretty-much reached their own limit too. It's been an exhausting day. They spent all morning trying to understand the intricacies of Jesus' teachings, getting more and more confused by the minute, and when they finally got a break they had to go bury a body and break the news to their teacher that his cousin had died. They are worried about Jesus. And they are exhausted, and ready to call it a night, and they think Jesus needs to call it a night too because as bad as their day has been, his has been even worse.

So they approach him and say, “it’s getting late, Jesus. The people are hungry. Don’t you think it’s about time to wrap it up? Let the people go, so that they can get some food.” And they don’t say this, but I’m sure they are thinking “and so that you and we can get some much-needed peace and quiet.”

And Jesus looks at them and asks them “what do you have?”

“We’ve got nothing, Jesus. Just five loaves and two fish. Not enough to feed the thousands of people who are here.”

I don’t think they were just talking about food, though. And I don’t think Jesus was either.

“We’ve got nothin’.”

We’re tired. Worn out. At the end of our rope. We’ve got nothin’.

“Perfect,” Jesus tells them. “*Nothing*, is what the Heavenly Father works best with.”

In the beginning, when there was nothing but a formless void, it was out of nothing that God spoke everything.

It was out of nothing but dust, that God breathed human life into existence.

God can work with nothing.

And from this nothing, not only was there enough to go around – but there was food left over. Not only did God provide when neither Jesus nor the disciples had much to give – but God provided *abundantly*. In the midst of the “valley of the shadow of death,” “my cup runneth over.”

Now, this would’ve been a great place to end the day. But the day wasn’t over yet. Jesus finally dismisses the crowds, and finally decides that he can take that much-needed time to be by himself. It’s getting dark by this point, and so he sends the disciples on ahead in the boat, and he climbs partway up the mountain to pray, and to be alone, and probably to have that good, long cry that he’s been putting off for the last several hours. But while he is up there, he is interrupted yet again. This time, not by crowds of people, but by a thunderstorm. And if there is one place you really do not want to be in the middle of a thunderstorm, it is on a mountain. So he comes back down and sees the disciples in the boat most of the way across the lake, but the disciples are having a hard time because the waves and the wind and the torrential rainstorm are just too much for that little boat.

Talk about a bad day for the disciples. They have gone from confused, to shocked, to sad, to exhausted, and now, to terrified. This day. Just. Will. Not. End.

And to top it all off, as if a storm wasn’t enough, they see in the distance something that looks like a ghost. Of course, it must be a ghost. That would be the perfect ending to this terrible, horrible, no-good, very-bad day.

But as we know, because we have read the rest of the story, it is not a ghost at all. It is Jesus, showing up. Showing up in the middle of his own terrible, horrible, no-good, very-bad day. Showing up in his own valley of the shadow of death. And despite his own pain, his own grief, his own sadness, his own frustration at being interrupted over and over and over again, he does the impossible. He walks across the water to the disciples. He meets them in their fear, he climbs into the boat where they are, and he calms the raging seas. Because when it comes to Jesus, even on his worst day when it seems like he should have nothing left to give he sees the crowds and their longings; he sees the disciples and their fears and what spills out is radical, untethered compassion. He meets the needs of those who need him the most. He feeds the hungry, and heals the sick, and even reaches down and pulls a flailing and panicking and too-big-for-his-britches Peter up out of the water.

God has taken a day of “I’ve got nothin’” and turned it into a day of grace without limits. A day of overflowing love and powerful miracles. God has taken the “dark and formless void” of the disciples’ souls and said “let there be light.” God has said “in the middle of your ‘I’ve got nothing,’ is my ‘I’ve got everything.’” And it is in this space, when we realize that we have reached the end of ourselves and the end of our own capacity to know what comes next or what to do or how even to take the next breath, this is when God’s hand reaches in and multiplies loaves and fishes and calms the raging seas. When God says “I’ve gotcha covered. Now *you* give the crowds something to eat. And you, step out of the boat.”

On your terrible, horrible, no-good, very-bad day; in this terrible, horrible, no-good, very-bad year; when you are tired and confused and scared and frustrated and sad and grieving and you’re ready to throw in the towel or just go curl up in bed with a blanket over your head until the craziness of the world is over, that’s when God says “nope. You don’t get to do that. I *know* it is hard right now. I *know* this is the day that won’t end, or the year that won’t end, or the nightmare that won’t end. I know that you feel like you’ve got nothing left. No more patience; no more wisdom; no more strength.

“But what that means now is that you can finally stop relying on yourself. Now that you’ve got nothing left, all that is left is to rely on me. To place your “nothing” into my hands so that I can turn that nothing into a miracle that **you** get to have a part in. When you’ve got nothing, through my strength your loaves and your fishes will feed a multitude. When you’ve got nothing, by my grace you will walk on water. When you have nothing left, you will discover a strength that you didn’t know you had. Because it is no longer your strength alone – but mine.”

Friends, we have been through a long journey in these last 11 months. And although there are so many glimmers of hope – that maybe – just maybe – this day might end and life may be moving in the direction of back to normal again (whatever that means), we

also know that the journey is not over yet. The vaccine starts to roll out and the numbers start to decline and we inhale hopefully, and then we start hearing stories of a new, more aggressive strand of the virus. And it's like, "Seriously, God? You just sent the crowds away and now it looks like there's a storm brewing in the distance. And I'm really hoping that's not a ghost that I'm seeing on the horizon but the way this day has gone, I would believe just about anything."

But if we have learned nothing else in our story today, let us remember this: It is ***precisely*** in ***these*** seasons of life that God shows up most profoundly. That God fills our empty cups to overflowing. Feeds our hungry souls in abundance. And calls us up out of our places of nothingness to walk on water.

So on this day, when we don't know what tomorrow might bring, may we find ourselves primed and ready to receive the strength of God and to step forward with compassion and joy.