

'How Dare the Sun Rise'
Rev. Dr. Ann C. Kemper
August 13, 2017
based on Matthew 14:22-33

Children's Message: How do you know there is a God? In the same way you know the sun will rise in the morning.

I have often wondered how people who experience tragedy or loss cope without the love and support of a church family? I guess what I really wonder is how people cope without Jesus?

It makes sense, doesn't it, for a congregation of Jesus followers to want to be the hands and feet of Jesus in every way possible ... Including walking with those who suffer.

One of our jobs as individuals or as a church family is to help people discover the kind of reassurance and peace Jesus provides. What would our strategy be for sharing our faith in such a way others find for themselves the strength and ... well, courage ... to cope with life's greatest challenges?

Today's reading from Matthew is a continuation of a great story line in the prime of Jesus' ministry.

Jesus had just finished feeding thousands of people with a few loaves of bread and a bit of fish. It is a story of how people who believe in Jesus share what they have with one another ... but it is also a story of how, through Jesus, God's love can grow exponentially within the church.

Sharing food with one another is great ... but the true metaphor is that God's blessing isn't just enough for everyone, but MORE than enough.

The story continues with today's reading when Jesus immediately sends the disciples away across the sea so he can be alone to pray. Without Jesus, the disciples are cast about on the sea trying to sail to the other side battling a stiff headwind and high seas.

Then, as the sun begins to rise, Jesus appears walking across the turbulent waters telling the disciples "... it is I. Do not be afraid."

Peter, our beloved disciple who most resembles our own human failings, takes Jesus at his word and dares to walk across the waves to meet him. But when fear overcomes his faith, Peter begins to sink ... saved only by the outstretched hand of Jesus.

"Oh ye of little faith," says Jesus. "Why did you doubt? I would never let you sink beneath the waves."

I have always read this story as though it was a story about how Peter failed the faith test ... about how Peter's doubt (even after seeing the miracle of Feeding the 5000) was enough to be judged as one of "little faith".

But I would like to consider another way to interpret this story ... not as one of little faith ... but a story of how even a little faith can save.

Just before I left on my trip Miss Jennie gave me a book. I began reading it as I waited to board the plane out of Rochester ... and I finished it a few hours later.

I didn't read it quickly because it was an easy read ... but because the story was so compelling I couldn't stop.

The book is called 'How Dare the Sun Rise', written by a Congolese woman named Sandra, who survived an ethnic massacre as a young girl that left her and her family traumatized.

Sandra shares her story of survival which ultimately is a story of faith and hope.

It was the morning after hundreds of people had been brutally massacred, and Sandra realized the magnitude of the death and destruction all around her, she wrote that she remembered thinking, "how dare the sun rise" after such a horrific experience.

Sandra would spend many years struggling with survivor guilt ... the fact she lived and her beloved little sister, and many others, did not.

Even though the story is beyond heart-breaking, it is also encouraging. To me Sandra's story was about finding hope in the midst of extreme adversity ... and how faith carries one through the darkest of days even when it seems as though one is sinking beneath wind battered waves.

What I found compelling was Sandra's honesty in questioning God's presence. As I read Sandra's 'memoirs of a war child' it was apparent God did appear ... in the outstretched hands of rescuers, refugee officials, teachers, her pastor and church, and others along the way.

Sandra endured because there were those around who reached out their hand and said, "Do not be afraid." and loved her through the trauma. Not to take it away, but to be there to help keep her head above water.

In that way Sandra survived.

Here's another way to think about the power of Jesus to save:

Last Sunday there was a 60 Minute segment about what some of the parents of children killed at Sandy Hook were doing today. Every one of the parents interviewed reported that a deep, deep sadness remained with them. One mother described it as, "A time of perpetual darkness." She too must have thought, "How dare the sun rise" the day after her child had been killed.

How does any parent go on after such heartbreak?

One mother, who was credited with great faith, said her heart would never heal ... but has been encouraged by the many people who have walked with her and her husband through the pain and suffering.

This mother holds on to the hope that one day upon her death she will hear two things:

1. "Well done, good and faithful servant." and

2. “Hi Mom!”

What all those parents had in common was finding strength in how others came to their side ... giving them a hand as they moved forward in very turbulent seas.

This 60-Minute segment was a heart-breaking story. It was a story of survival in the midst of unspeakable trauma. In that sense, it was not unlike Sandra’s story.

But what both stories have in common is how an outstretched hand has the power to carry one through the darkest of days even when one thinks they are sinking beneath the wind battered waves.

I’ve said many times the underlying storyline of the Biblical narrative was: hope.

But hope does not stand alone.

If hope was the fulcrum that connects our life’s story to God’s story, then faith and love rest in equal weight at each end of the scale.

Heartbreak and loss such as I’ve described is the extreme in the human experience. I pray no one here ever experiences such trauma as Sandra or the parents of Sandy Hook.

In many ways it is impossible to comfort another person who has experienced such tragedy other than to be there as a loving presence.

Offering a hand to one in such pain puts a Jesus follower in a vulnerable place. We voluntarily offer to share in their pain. That can be a difficult thing to do.

If we are to take our job seriously to be Jesus’ hands and feet ... then I guess we have to also believe by faith we can walk on water and trust Jesus enough to make ourselves vulnerable.

By faith we can assist people from drowning in a sea of despair, hopelessness, and loss.

That takes courage!

Today’s gospel lesson is a miracle in and of itself. Yes, it is about the miracle of walking on water ... but it is also about trusting Jesus enough to even try to get out of the boat and walk on water.

May we be the ones who dare to step out for people who finding themselves saying, “How dare the sun rise!”

Thanks be to God!

Amen.