

Defining Moment: Courage in Difficulty by Pastor Jenn Gospel Reading Matthew 14: 22-36

We are on our second week of studying Defining Moments, that is the moments that help to establish who we are. Last week we talked about how temptation leads us to forget our identities, yet we can overcome those temptations just as Jesus did, by remembering we are beloved children of God. This week, the defining moment in our Scripture lesson will lead a disciple named Peter to find out about courage in the midst of a difficulty, in the midst of a storm.

Now just to give you some background information, and in order to better understand where Peter was with his faith journey, it's good to know where he had been. You probably recall Peter was a fisherman, and one day Jesus called him to fish for people, and something drew him to say yes, so he dropped the net and followed Jesus. From there Peter heard Jesus preach many good messages on the kingdom of God and what kingdom discipleship is for: blessing all areas of our lives, for all people. Then Peter sees kingdom discipleship. He saw Jesus heal his mother-in-law in his own home. He witnessed Jesus cleanse a leper, bring hearing to the deaf, and recover sight to the blind, all the while reuniting each of those persons into their communities that had previously banned them for their sickness. Jesus cleansed a man of his evil spirits and healed a woman who had been hemorrhaging for 12 years. And then Peter saw Jesus feed over 5,000 people with just 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish. *The kingdom of God was among them.*

But then Jesus began to talk about how things were going to get difficult for Peter, and for those who follow him. He says in Matthew 10: 16 'See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. ¹⁷Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; ¹⁸and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. Jesus announces that their faith in the kingdom is going to be challenged, because storms are coming.

That's where this text picks up. Jesus goes off to pray but sends his disciples on a boat, and while on it the text says in verse 24, the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. The disciples are being challenged on their own, without Jesus. He is nowhere in sight, and they are being battered around all night. Then when Jesus does appear to them the following morning, they are scared when they see him walking on the lake towards them. Which, to be honest, I would be too, he's walking on the lake. But Jesus says this, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.'

And this is where it gets really interesting, verse 28 Peter says, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.' Jesus invites him to come, and the text says Peter got out of the boat and started walking towards Jesus on the water, until he noticed the strong wind and got scared, and thus began to sink. He cries out for help, is saved and is told, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?'

Now I want to stop here. I want us to be careful with this passage. Because some take this text to mean that *if you just have enough faith you can walk on water.* I am not comfortable with that interpretation, and I'll tell you why, because it can easily lead to *"If you just have a enough faith you can be healed" "If you just have enough faith you won't get sick or die".* *That is a deep misunderstanding of that text that can easily lead to guilty feelings if we begin to sink in the challenges of life. And life will present challenges.* I believe the reference to little faith is about when the disciples were in the boat, battered in the storms, and believed to be on their own. They thought they were fighting this storm alone. But they weren't. All that Jesus taught them and showed them, of the presence of God's kingdom, should have reminded them that God was with them, the kingdom of God was with them, in each other. A defining moment for us friends, is when we know, believe, that when the challenges or storms of life are upon us, we are not alone, we have the kingdom of God, revealed through each other, believers of Jesus Christ.

You see, up to this point, Matthew is trying to convey to the church of believers he is writing to, that the message of the kingdom is this, God is in the boat, made real in the community of faith as it makes its way through the storms of life. That even though Jesus has risen from the grave and has not come back yet, that's okay, *the kingdom is still here, through the teachings and the power of Jesus Christ, in each other.* In fact, Peter sinks because he left the boat, the community of faith. He was not meant to walk on the water, that is something only God in Jesus can do, but he was meant to know he is not alone. And when he walked away from the other disciples, and the waves started up, his faith was gone.

Friends, the kingdom of God is among us, it is in us. And when we believe that God's goodness and righteousness is real and present, such faith gives us strength to get through the trials of life. I like the way Jesus puts it in the parable of the Sower. in Matthew 13:9-23 he speaks of seeds falling on a path, rocky ground, and amongst thorns. And then Jesus describes this parable like this: ⁹ When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. ²⁰ The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. ²¹ But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. ²² The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. ²³ But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. Someone who understands that God's way, God's kingdom, God's work is all around us, is someone whose faith gives them courage despite the strong winds and waves of difficulties.

That means they see the kingdom work when volunteers take a warm homemade meal to the homeless in downtown Harrisburg. And treat them with dignity and encouragement.

They see the kingdom of God through the work of UMCOR and the relief to those battling natural disasters, wrapping them in blankets, providing housing, until they can assist to rebuild houses and communities in Kentucky or in the Philippines (Filipins)

And they see the kingdom when the finances sent to a missionary in the Ukraine buy enough supplies to help hundreds of refugees at a church.

Friends, when we want and need some courage in life's difficulties, Jesus invites us to take heart, to not be afraid, and know the kingdom of God is with us, it is present through each other and our faith. So, the next time you are facing a storm, do not get out of the boat, stay in it with us, your church family, and with God's help, we will get through it, together.

Let us pray:

Lord, through the storm, the trials and the tears, may You reveal yourself in us, to offer a hand, so we will not be afraid. Help us receive the blessing of community as you dwell in our hearts in Jesus' name, Amen.