

## **Keeping Grounded When the Wind Blows**

Matthew 14:22-33

“...but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them.” Matthew 14:24

The Reverend Joanna Adams  
Morningside Presbyterian Church  
Atlanta, Georgia  
August 7, 2005

This wonderful story from Matthew’s Gospel puts me in mind of an old story that is told about women in the ministry. It came to mind because I have been thinking that while in some corners of the Christian church it’s still considered odd for a woman to be a minister, it is no big deal here at Morningside. When I was ordained twenty-six years ago, I remember that on the staff of this church was Joyce Rime, one of the wonderful early women in parish ministry. I am the third in a succession of ministers who have been head of staff here at Morningside, and I am grateful to have been so warmly received this past year. The story goes like this: There was a church, imagine this, that was unhappy when the pulpit committee announced that the new pastor was going to be a female. Most of the members softened as time went by. But there was one elder (it was a Presbyterian church) who continued to be disgruntled. One of his best friends, also an elder in the church, tried to get him to be a little kinder about it. He decided that he, himself, would get to know the minister so maybe he could help his friend. He invited her to go fishing with him. They went out on the boat, dropped anchor, got ready to fish, then realized they had left the tackle box back on the dock. “No problem,” the minister said. And with that, she got out of the boat, walked across the water, retrieved the tackle box, came back and they fished the afternoon away. When the elder asked his friend how the fishing trip with the new minister had gone, he said, “You were right. We shouldn’t have called this woman ‘minister.’ She can’t even swim.”

As long as I’m telling old stories, I will tell another one. When I was a student at Emory University, every freshman was required to take a course in survival swimming. You could not graduate from Emory unless you had learned how to save yourself from drowning. No exceptions made. The presupposition made behind it was that the day might come that something unexpected would happen to you in the water and that you would need to know how to handle yourself. This is also the case on dry land. Unexpected things happen. Perils appear. And you

have to know how to handle them. One of the problems, though, is that many people live their whole lives as if they were in peril when, in fact, they are not. What sinks them is not drowning but their fear of drowning. They are afraid that something bad is going to happen. On the water or on dry land, the challenge is to learn how to survive in challenging times and not let fear do you in.

I read about a father and son who decided to take sailing lessons together. Both were astonished to learn that the very first thing the instructor wanted them to do was to turn the sail boat over, and to figure out how to right it again. The instructor wanted them to know that there were powerful elements at work that truly had the potential of overturning a sailboat. That was the first lesson: be aware of potential dangers, and then learn how to sink and survive. The thrill of sailing comes in discovering how to face fear and to overcome it. You learn that you can have your boat overturned, and you can come back up again to the surface. It's a great lesson for living in this world. There is not such thing as smooth sailing through all of life. And only those who are willing to face the risks will experience what comes with truly living. I cannot think of a worse kind of life to live than one that is experienced in the easy chair by the fireplace because you are afraid to get up and go out and turn your face into the wind of God's future.

Whatever the opposite of this exhilaration was, that was what the disciples experienced the night they found the wind to be frighteningly against them. Their small boat was battered by the waves. They were far from land and full of fear. Realizing their distress, Jesus, who according to this story could overcome even the forces of nature, came walking toward them on the sea. But when they saw him, instead of relaxing, they became even more afraid. They thought he was a ghost. As if the wild waves had not been enough to take their breath away! Jesus spoke to them: "Take heart, it is I, be not afraid."

Imagine hearing a message like that in the midst of the greatest storm of your life. Have you had any storms yet? You will before it's over. The storms come. The promise faith offers is that in the midst of them, there is grounding for us in the assurance of our Lord who was no one less than God with us: Be not afraid. I am with you all the way.

And on those days when clearly the wind is blowing against you, and you cannot make a step of progress, imagine that deep down, you detect a whisper coming from another realm saying to you: Listen, you can handle this with me at your side. No matter what, I am with you all the way.

Have you ever had the three o'clock in the morning terrors? You go to sleep, you are just fine, but then there you are staring at the digital clock: 3:00 a.m. You are wide awake and worried to death. You don't know exactly what you're worried about. You have to search around for the subjects but they come soon enough, don't they? Money, how the kids are doing. An older friend says that he wakes regularly at night sure that his coronary hour has come at last. He pats his heart, and his heart seems to be doing alright. But he's lost a night's sleep worrying about a heart attack that hasn't happened. Fear is an involuntary response to danger. But sometimes what we're afraid of is not even happening. Yet, there we are anxious about calamities that do not come to pass. In the midst of those that do come to pass, the promise of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that in the darkest nights, there is the sustaining power that comes from another realm that will hold us.

Peter heard the reassuring words of Jesus across the waves, but he was only half convinced. "If it is you, why don't you tell me to get out of the boat and I will walk towards you." Notice here that having faith doesn't mean sitting on your hands and letting Jesus do everything. Peter was instructed to take some positive action, to make some forward motion. So he gets out of the boat and he, himself, begins to walk on water. But just as soon as he thinks about the wind again, and how strong it is, he becomes frightened and he starts to go down. "Help me," he cries. And Jesus helps of course, but he does fuss at Peter a little bit. "Why do you doubt me, oh you of little faith?" It's so interesting to know the meaning of the Greek verb here "doubt." It means, literally, to go in two directions. Boy, do I understand that. I have faith and I have fear, and so much of the time, I am right there, between them. That is what doubt means: thinking it's going to be alright or thinking that it's going to be the worst calamity that ever happened. And when you let yourself get stuck there, you become paralyzed, and you begin to sink. What Peter could have done was to say to himself, "Peter, don't you let the wind take your attention away from the promise and the goal." But he let fear have the upper hand in his consciousness. He got distracted from his faith and under he went.

It's interesting to me that this story was understood by the early Church, not as a miracle story, but as a reassuring reminder to the church that was struggling with seemingly insurmountable odds, that they had not been abandoned, that Christ was with them and they would not sink. And so it came to pass that across those early years, just as that night on the stormy sea, the Lord took the disciples' little bit of faith and worked with them through the long dark nights of hopelessness, until the point that they were able to say, "Yes, we believe, truly, you are the son of God." God has not abandoned us and never will.

Now maybe there's not a single nervous Nelly here at Morningside today, not a person who worries about dire possibilities and forgets the sustaining presence of God. But if you ever do come to the point where you are worried, I want you to remember the promise of Jesus: I am her. Be not afraid. I will keep you going.

I loved reading, not long ago, about the origins of the words of that wonderful spiritual that Ethel Waters sang time and time again. *His Eye is on the Sparrow, and I Know He Watches Me*. The words of the hymn were written in 1905 by a woman who had asked the person she had admired most in the world, a man who had terrible physical difficulties to deal with for decade upon decade. She asked him one day, "What is your secret?"

He answered, "His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me."

The late, great Harry Emerson Fosdick, who preached in the twentieth century, spoke a truth you and I need to remember in our time. "Faith liberates, fear imprisons. Fear paralyzes, faith empowers. Faith encourages, fear disheartens. Fear puts hopelessness at the center of life while faith makes possible rejoicing in God."

The tragedy of so much of human existence is not that it will end. It is that so many people go through life without ever having lived their lives, without trusting God fully. They've spent their time worrying about what terrible might happen, while all the while, God is saying, step out in faith. If you think of the people that you most admire in history or in your own life, I guarantee

you that there is not a single person that will come to your mind, not a single person, whose life has been controlled by fearful self-concern. Not the astronauts on the Discovery space shuttle, not the soldiers who will go into battle today in Iraq, not Martin Luther King, not Mahatma Gandhi, not Jesus Christ. They went out in faith, trusting that while life is full of risks, they are worth taking.

I close with the words of one of my heroines, Helen Keller; blind, deaf and without speech from her early childhood. She went on to live as meaningful a life as a person could live. She graduated cum laude from Radcliffe College and wrote many books. The title of one was *Let Us Have Faith*. Take her words with you. “Security is a superstition. It exists not in nature, nor does humanity experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure or it is not worth living.”

Let the promise of Jesus be the ground beneath your feet: No matter how fierce the wind, take heart. I am here. Be not afraid.