

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Proper 14  
St. Ann's Episcopal Church, Old Lyme, CT  
August 10<sup>th</sup>, 2008  
1 Kings 19:9-18  
Psalm 85:8-13  
Romans 10:5-15  
Matthew 14:22-33

***SERMON***

Time is moving at a very rapid pace. It is difficult for the analysts of culture to keep up. Most of us here this morning would be considered to be “moderns”. My dear daughter Thayer is “post-modern”. I haven’t a clue what category my granddaughter, Thayer’s niece, fits into. I think she has a category of her own.

In the good old days you could coast along for five hundred years, even a millennium with the same designation for the age in which you lived. That’s no longer the case. We’re in a new and different age about every twelve years these days.

Nevertheless, the people that analyze and describe culture—the historians and social scientists—have described us as “modern”. We’re different from the men and women who lived in the classical age. We’re different from the dark agers and the people of the renaissance. The people who lived in those other ages were essentially the same people as we are. The world they lived in was different, and so they responded to those different circumstances in ways that we do not and could not. That doesn’t mean they were a different breed of being. It’s simply that they responded differently to a different world.

In the church, the biggest difference between us and the people who lived in different ages is that we have lost most of the sense that they had of the miraculous aspect of life. We speak a different language from them. We use a different vocabulary and syntax to describe the world in which we live.

We describe the world around us with the language of science. It is a rational and analytic language of the mind that scientists are comfortable with but that leaves no room for soul to wander and search for deeper meanings beyond that which can be described and defined with formulae and equations, statistics and specifics.

We live in an age which is devoted to the gathering and refining of data and information. We are desperate to be able to predict and thereby reduce risk. We are, basically, failures at the project we have set for ourselves. We can’t predict earthquake or tsunamis. We haven’t been able to guess what the price of a barrel of oil will be next week or the price of a stock today. But that doesn’t stop us from discarding miracles as silly notions created in less advanced societies.

This morning we read a story from the Gospel of Matthew that requires that we set aside our scientific mindset, and allow ourselves to be carried away by the recounting of a miracle. If we can open up our minds and souls to the possibilities of a miracle, we can learn some important truths from the story. If we listen to it with closed minds, a semi sneer about the lack of sophistication of those poor souls that were so misguided in days gone by, we lose the essence of the story and in losing that we lose the essence of the Gospel.

This is the second account of Jesus and the disciples in a boat on a storm tossed sea in Matthew’s Gospel. There are some differences between the two stories, but it’s important that

we ask ourselves why a story of disciples in a boat and Jesus on storm tossed seas were so important to the very early community of Christians that the story bore repeating.

Jesus does a Godlike thing. The psalmist gives this description: “When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you they were afraid; the very deep trembled. The clouds poured out water; the skies thundered; your arrows flashed on every side. The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind; your lightnings lit up the world; the earth trembled and shook. Your way was through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters; yet your footprints were unseen.” The psalmist had no question about whether God ruled over creation or not. So Matthew helps his community to understand that Jesus is God and so has power and rule over creation because he is the creator.

That ancient Christian community could easily understand that Matthew was describing them when he told a story about Jesus’ disciples bobbing and wallowing in a stormy sea, battered and bashed by winds and waves. It was not easy to follow Jesus Christ in that age so long. Society battered and bashed them. Constantly in danger, trials and tribulations washed over them and blew them to and fro. It was terribly difficult to be a Christian in a world that thought you were challenging the status quo, and upsetting the balance of things.

For us, modern or post-modern, it is doubtful that when we heard the reading from the Gospel this morning we thought of us as being in that boat on a storm tossed sea—praying that God would calm the wind and waves and bring us safety and security. If you did hear the story from the perspective of being in that boat, you are unusual. We’ve lost the sense of the miraculous as well as the sense of community required to hear the story that way. The church in this modern age is different from the church in that Gospel age. We are not beset by the world around us. We have become the world around us. We’ve adopted and adapted and made ourselves comfortable. If we experience a storm in our lives it is not a community upheaval it is a personal, individual situation.

We can hardly hear this story of Jesus walking on the water and saving the disciples as a story about the church. We aren’t at odds with the world any longer. We have become observers. We are no longer participants.

A tyrant sends his police forces into the churches in his land and has the officers drum on the sides of the pews with their cudgels, drowning out the prayers and scripture and forcing the parishioners out of the nave, out of the boat. We’re silent, we read about the incident in the newspaper. And we say, “Tsk-tsk—bad man.” But we don’t insist that our State Department do something about Mugabe and what he has done to the Diocese of Harare. An old woman, drummed out of the church, explained to a reporter “I go to Church to talk to the Lord and feel better. Now I don’t know where to go.” She had been ejected from the boat in a storm tossed sea, but no hand reached out to save her.

A bishop is assassinated in Iraq. Believers are slaughtered in Sudan. The list goes on and on. Our boat is on a storm tossed sea. Here, though, we are blessed. The Lord has heard our prayer, “Lord save me!” and he has put out his hand and, for us, stilled the wind and the waves. We are blessed. We can be grateful and worshipful, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God,” but we should not rest easy. We need to be concerned that there are places in this world where being a Christian is a hazardous occupation. We need to be concerned that there are brothers and sisters in Christ who have to hide in the bottom of the boat for fear of their lives, and we should ask the question: “What can we do?”

We are blessed. St. Ann’s gives us many opportunities to be connected with the world beyond our doors--little ways and big ways—many ways:

A can or two of meat for our outreach ministry; a crisp dollar bill or a wilted five in the white envelope in the pew rack for our ministry to the Dominican Republic—time devoted to the soup kitchen or the Nearly New Shop.

The amount or the size is not important. It is the contact and the connection with the other disciples in the boat that is important—the outstretched hand.

Jesus said, “If you are there in my name, I am there. When we stretch out our hand to others in the name of Christ, they will be able to say, “Emmanuel! God is with us!”

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