

Christmas in August

A Sermon Expositing Matthew 14:22-33

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I hadn't really seen as much energy around a church initiative to that point in my three years as a pastor. There was a plot of land on the corner of the church property that sat empty all the time. We had just decided to turn it into a community garden wherein neighbors could lease raised beds for no more than the cost of the water and we were all excited about the prospects. The concept wasn't simply to grow vegetables, it was to grow community in a somewhat disconnected community. Gardeners would meet neighbors they were otherwise too busy to encounter on a daily basis. Kids in the neighborhood would see for the first time in their lives where food comes from. People would get their hands dirty together and enjoy one another and there would be a box in the tool shed where gardeners would be asked to place a portion of their crop and twice weekly that box would be emptied and carried over to the Micah 6 Food Pantry to supplement their offerings.

It encompassed everything we wanted to be and do...building community, working for justice, serving others all in one project. When we asked for donations for the materials to build we met our goal in a week. We were going to build part of the garden then use that as advertisement to get gardeners, but we filled out the first phase of the garden just with people walking by while we were working. We saw neighbors who'd lived a block apart for 20 years meet each other for the first time and it happened on the church lawn. It was just the kind of thing we hoped would happen. Community was growing in the soil of the garden!

We did have one neighbor immediately across the street who wasn't very happy. She thought it was an ok idea, but with the garden out her window she was concerned it would fall into disrepair and be an eyesore. We were glad that all the activity in the garden settled her nerves and the turnout at the grand opening and dedication was better attended than we ever imagined. That day felt like we were getting somewhere in the world. A single community garden isn't the salvation of the world, but it's moving in that direction. We had done, we were doing something akin to resurrection. We named the garden for the day of resurrection, *The Third Day Community Garden*, which is incidentally also the day of creation on which God created all the things that grow from the earth.

Google Maps has updated their satellite and street view images of the Third Day Community Garden in the last few months allowing me to go back and see what is happening there now. The crushed gravel walkways between beds are invisible they're so overgrown with grass. The beds are untended, some covered with black plastic, some with tall weeds growing. The vines we planted to climb the fence never took. There are no vegetables, it's a mess. It's an eyesore. It's a metaphor.

It feels a little bit like the way life and faith seem to work more often than not. A tremendous period of motivation driven by hope and vision and clarity became a beautiful thing, but here a little while later we don't seem to be much closer to the end we had in mind after all.

If you're in one of those high energy, motivated places in which your faith is running high and your hope is soaring well, keep it quiet - the rest of us are in a pandemic. I'm kidding of course, I celebrate that moment with you and can't wait to see what beautiful thing comes of it. Many of us need to see your faith on

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

display and that's more what I'm thinking about this morning, because the world around us feels a bit like the place that Peter and the other disciples found themselves in the little bit of Matthew we read this morning. The word used to describe what the wind and the sea were doing to the boat they were in is usually used to describe torture. The boat was being tortured by the waves in the fourth watch of the night, the period between 3am and 6am. They were further from nightfall than from dawn and they were closer to where they were going than to where they'd come from, but still arriving and seeing morning seemed dubious. Dawn and their destination were closer than ever, but still felt unreachable - and Peter was all soaking wet. He'd had enough faith to stand on the water, just not quite enough to *walk* on it.

The whole encounter feels a little like planting a *community* *garden* only to see it become an eyesore with no vegetables where nobody wants to hang out. Peter standing there in the boat, still being battered by the sea, drying off from his grand attempt gone soggy feels like all those other times that I, that we have invested the best of our faith and effort and hope into something only to wonder if it is ever getting to anything.

It feels like cooping ourselves in our houses for months on end to force the infection rate to drop all over New York only to watch the virus torturing much of the rest of our country. It feels like together cultivating a liturgy, a form of worship that celebrates togetherness, inclusion, welcome, joy, community only to have to worship in the isolation of our homes for 21 weeks plus at least a few more. It feels like going off to college only to come home mid-semester, like working hard through high school only to stare at a screen for college. It feels a little like parents turning their lives upside down and pulling their hair out to get their kids through the end of one digital semester only to find out another one is on its way. It feels a little like living through, fighting through a civil rights movement only to find the phrase "Black Lives Matter" is still - controversial? It feels a little like - what? We've all got our little pieces of this big, unexpected, disappointing story we're living. Am I wrong or does this world sometimes feel like we've come through the night, across the sea, and out onto the water only to find ourselves still adrift, wet, afraid, and praying we'll somehow see morning?

Well, there is some good news. Christmas has come in August. *Get out your tinsel and your tree, string up some lights, and buy me a present, because the same thing we usually celebrate* in December is breaking into our summer. The birth of Jesus, Christmas, gives us cause to celebrate more than just the birth of a child, which is a pretty holy and outstanding moment in itself. It gives us a chance to celebrate the birth of God into the flesh and blood world. At Christmas we celebrate God, the all knowing, all powerful, omniscient, cosmic, magnificent creator of all that is becoming incarnate, wrapping God's self in flesh becoming one of us in order to be *with* us. Christmas celebrates ultimate authority being laid down in the itchy straw of a manger.

Don't ask me why, I can't explain it to you, but at Christmas time we are celebrating the fact that God wants to be with us. Not only that, we celebrate that God wants to be with us - where we are! Newly dating couples know that when you're deciding where to hang out for an evening-in you pick the place of whoever is neater and has the nicer home. You don't go to the apartment with dishes strewn about and smelling of gym socks. But for some reason when God says God wants to be with us, God also wants to be in the messed up place we call home. Matthew tells us this story about God coming to our place despite its messes and brokenness in his opening chapters, but almost as if he is anticipating that we'd forget that he tells the story again in the 14th chapter when the disciples are out on that lake. Jesus has gone to be alone in quiet, in prayer, in rest; which he's been looking to do for a couple chapters now, but keeps getting interrupted by the need of the world around him. Then when the waves are beating the boat and the disciples don't know if morning will come Jesus bends the rules of the universe he created not to bring the boat to shore, but to get to the boat himself. I don't know why God likes coming into the midst of our trouble, but that's what this story is about.

It can seem sometimes when we hear these stories of the unfathomable doings of Jesus that the gospel writers are trying to argue for the existence and the power of God, but they're not. They're writing to an already faithful audience. Well, an already trying-to-be-faithful audience. Matthew doesn't need to argue that God exists, that God is out there, and that God is powerful. This isn't a story about God's power or God's existence. It's a story about God's proximity.

So when you look around you and redemption feels a lot like an unfinished project that will never be complete, or when you've got enough faith to get up, but not enough to get going, or if you're not sure morning will come or if you'll ever arrive where you're trying to go then take heart - this looks a lot like the kind of place that God likes to show up.

Amen.