



THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

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The Best News

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Psalm 46

¹ God is our refuge and strength,
a very present^a help in trouble.
² Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
³ though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult. Selah
⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.
⁵ God is in the midst of the city;^b it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.
⁶ The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.
⁷ The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.^c Selah
⁸ Come, behold the works of the LORD;
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.
⁹ He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.
¹⁰ "Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth."
¹¹ The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.^d Selah

Matthew 14:22-33

²² Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go
on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds.²³
And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the
mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there
alone,²⁴ but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was
far from the land, for the wind was against them.²⁵ And early
in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea.²⁶
But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were
terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear.²⁷

^a Or well proved

^b Heb of it

^c Or fortress

^d Or fortress

But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."²⁸ Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."²⁹ He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.³⁰ But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!"³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"³² When they got into the boat, the wind ceased.³³ And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." (NRSV)

Did you ever think there was a monster under your bed? I know I sometimes did. In fact I can still remember that the monster and I had very clearly understood rules of engagement. The monster would not bother me as long as I did not put a foot down on the floor; and, even more importantly, the monster would not bother me as long as I didn't actually look under the bed to confirm that he was there.

Now, it's easy to smile at childhood fears from the more secure ramparts of adulthood, but in some ways our childhood perspectives have an advantage over our oh-so-realistic views of maturity. Certainly, the Bible has a healthy respect for forces of chaos that lie just below the surface, just below our figurative bed. The very essence of the creation story is that God brought order, creation, life itself out of chaos. [Genesis 1:1-10] Isaiah was alluding to God's victory over the forces of chaos when he wrote, "Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon." [Isaiah 51:9-10].

And the Psalmist wrote painfully of times in life when it seems that chaos is about to overwhelm our carefully tended bulwarks of stability, times when "the waters roar and foam" making even our "mountains tremble" with their tumult, [Psalm 46]. "Save me, O God," sings the psalmist, "for the waters have come up to my neck.

I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters and the flood sweeps over me." [Psalm 69: 1-3].

When you think about it, even if we are kind of smug on the monster issue, don't we all still harbor a certain fear, sometimes an almost morbid fascination, with the threat of chaos lurking under the placid surface of life. Scan this week's TV Guide and you are sure to see the usual complement of shows bearing such titles as, "Savage Storms", or "Twisters" or even, "When Animals Attack." We are intrigued by the notion that nature can still overwhelm our technological defenses.

And it isn't just natural chaos we fear. For all our cultural evolution, for all the 3,000 peace treaties that have been painstakingly negotiated over the past 4,000 years, the Society of International Law in London reports that in those 4,000 years there have been only 268 years of peace. In the last three centuries there have been 286 years of war on the European continent alone. Just to voice the words Antietam, Flanders, holocaust, Tet, Ruanda, Bagdad, Darfur, Lebanon is to voice a chilling reminder that our vaunted civilization spreads but a thin veneer over our human capacity for mayhem.

Finally, haven't each of us come far enough in life to know that few lives escape their personal testing times - times of fatigue, or illness, or loss, or failure when our own rationality falters, and we seem overwhelmed by emotions surging up from within. We may say "we're going through some rough seas," or "I feel knocked down by the waves" or "I'm losing my bearings," but we are talking about a sickening fear that our very soul is being overwhelmed by chaos.

In today's Gospel lesson, God speaks a word of assurance to our anxious souls. Matthew recalls a dark night of chaotic bad news before introducing first, the "Good News," then, the "Better News," and finally, the very "Best News" of Jesus the Christ.

The bad news is obvious enough: the disciples, Matthew's symbol here for the early church, have been battling the forces of chaos all night, and the forces of chaos are winning. Tired, wet, and chilled to the bone, the disciples have been pulling doggedly on their oars for hours, but the wind is against them and the waves are hammering their small craft. With some

three hours to go before dawn, they are still floundering far from land.

Into this desperate scene, God sends Good News in the form of Jesus walking across the water. Now, I know this scene gives many of you a serious case of the "yeah, buts." "Yeah, but I don't know if I really believe Jesus actually walked on water." "Yeah, but why didn't the disciples recognize him?" and so on.

Well, I can't prove Jesus literally walked on the water, but why not? I know as sure as I'm standing here that Jesus walked through the pain of death on the cross and across 20 centuries to lift me up when I was sinking. Would walking across the water have been more of a challenge?

And any way, doesn't our skepticism miss the point? The point of the story isn't that Jesus saves money on ferry tokens. The point is that God, the power of love, cohesion and order in the universe is more powerful than the forces of entropy, disorder and chaos. The point is that God's power of love is abroad in the world in and through Jesus the Christ.

The Psalmist proclaims that God "made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed." [Psalm 107:29]. Job reminds his friends that only God has "trampled the waves of the Sea" [9:8]. Mark's Gospel recalls Jesus rebuking the wind and saying unto the sea, "Peace, be still." [Mark 4:39.]

Now it truly is Good News to know that God is Lord of the Universe and that his power is supreme. But you and I are way too self-centered to be reassured by God's potential power. We always want to know, "what's in it for us?" What good would all that power be if God were saving it up for a really important job on some other planet? Would we be reading this story today if Jesus had come walking across the water and passed right by the disciples without pausing to help?

The even "better news" emerges as Peter steps out of the boat. In some mysterious way, faith in Christ can empower his church, his disciples, his people - you and me - to push back the forces of chaos as well, to walk courageously on stormy seas. It is a common place that faith can embolden us to take on and succeed at daunting challenges. As Henry Ford wrote, "whether you think you can or not, you are right."

But even this "better news" has its limit, for as Peter steps out in faith a gust of wind knocks the courage out of him and he sinks like a stone. We each have some measure of faith, and there is some reassurance in knowing that we will prevail over chaos if our faith is strong enough. But how reassuring is a story that teaches we will sink like stones unless our faith is stronger than Peter's? Does anyone here think their faith is stronger than the faith of the saint Jesus called his "rock"?

Most of us identify better with the fellow who fell off a cliff but managed to catch a tree limb on the way down. Dangling from the branch he looked back up to the cliff and cried, "Is anyone up there?" A voice came back, "I am here. I am the Lord. Do you believe me?" "Yes, Lord, I believe. I really believe, but I can't hang on much longer." "That's all right. If you really believe you have nothing to worry about. I will save you. Just let go of the branch." A long silence, and then: "Umm. Is anyone else up there?"

The very best news in Matthew's lesson is not just about what God can do in the abstract, and it's not even just about what we can do when our faith is strong. The very best news in Matthew's lesson is about what Jesus does for us even when our faith falters. The very best news is that Jesus truly is what Matthew proclaimed him to be in his very first chapter: Jesus truly is "Emmanuel", "God with us." [Matthew 1:23]

Matthew tells us that as the disciples lost their battle against the chaos of that night, Jesus came to them - that as Peter's faith failed and he began to slip beneath the waves, Jesus came to him. When they needed him, Jesus came.

Dr. Robert Sims has written [Robert F. Sims, "And then Jesus Came"] that with just four words, "and then Jesus came," God draws a line in the sand of every soul: The lepers huddled on the side of the road - cast out by their families and friends . . . and then Jesus came. The blind man staggered down the road groping in his world of darkness . . . and then Jesus came. The demoniac struggled with a mental illness overwhelming his tortured mind . . .and then Jesus came. The woman caught in adultery cringed on the ground hiding her face and awaiting the stone that would crush her skull . . .and then Jesus came. The

disciples gathered in the upper room, hiding from their persecutors behind locked doors . . . and then Jesus came.

Can you feel the power in this story? It is the power of the story of life being truly told. He was sick, frightened, alone and a dying of AIDS . . .and then Jesus came. She was imprisoned by alcoholism, her family and career slowly unraveling . . . and then Jesus came. The cancer had done its worst, death was near, and fear gripped his heart . . . and then Jesus came. The burdens were too heavy. The pain was too great. The pills were already in her hands . . .and then Jesus came.

Whose story is this? It is Peter's story. It is the church's story. It is my story. And it is your story. Oh, the details may not be the same, but the essentials are always there. It is the story of your life, your struggle, your hurt, your anxiety, your pain, your fear of chaos. It is the story of billions of lives across a score of centuries. It is the story of loss consoled, wounds healed, courage bolstered, and hope restored. And the bottom line of every story reduces to four words: "and then Jesus came"

Dear friends, may we remember these four words the next time we are caught in a small boat lashed by winds and pounded by waves - the next time we are caught in chaos and anxiety, and we're afraid of the darkness and uncertainty of that next step. May we remember that it was Jesus who said, "I am with you always, unto the end of the age." And "come unto me."

Don't worry that your faith may fail. Peter's faith failed and immediately Jesus grasped his hand. Remember rather that even when your faith fails, Christ's hand is always there for you. No matter where you are, no matter how wide the sea. No matter whether you are adrift in a storm, imprisoned by your worst fear or walking through the valley of the shadow of death - you need only cry with Peter, "Lord, Save Me." And Jesus will be there.

The really best news turns out to be that you don't need to have great faith; you just need to have a mustard seed of faith. You just need enough courage to take that first step out of the boat, just enough desire to whisper from your heart, "Lord, Save Me."

And when the winds which have been against us suddenly cease, when the fears that have gripped us lose their power, when the deliverance we have hoped for is in hand, then we will know we are in the presence of the Almighty. And then may we join the disciples and the church universal in proclaiming, "Truly, you are the Son of God." **Amen.**