

Like a Rock

A sermon preached by
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Text:
Matthew 14:22-33

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Immediately [Jesus] 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 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."



Anybody know what chaos is?

Not KAOS, the "international organization of evil" which, according to CONTROL in the classic "Get Smart" series, was formed in Bucharest, Romania, in 1904. But chaos – c-h-a-o-s. The dictionary says it is a state of utter confusion or disorder; a total lack of organization or order; any confused, disorderly mass; the infinity of space or formless matter supposed to have preceded the existence of the ordered universe; a chasm or abyss.

As I read that I wondered if whoever wrote it has seen my desk here at the church. Now *that's* chaos. But then I got to the part about "chasm or abyss" and realized that it's actually my *mind* that

they've described. Particularly how I'm feeling just before my vacation which begins on Tuesday.

Chaos. In Greek mythology, *Khaos* was the first of the primeval gods to emerge at the creation of the universe. She was followed in quick succession by *Gaia* (Earth), *Tartaros* (the Underworld) and *Eros* (Love the life-bringer). Khaos was the lower atmosphere which surrounded the earth - invisible air and gloomy mist. Her name *khaos* literally means the gap, the space between heaven and earth. Khaos was the mother or grandmother of the other substances of air: Nyx (Night), Erebus (Darkness), Aither (Light) and Hemera (Day).

Chaos (Greek χάος *khaos*) is the void preceding the creation of the universe in these Greek creation myths, the initial "gap" created by the original separation of heaven and earth. This very same concept occurs in most religions of the Ancient Near East. The motif of "struggle against chaos" (German: *chaoskampf*) is at the foundation of these most of the world's religions – creation myths which often depict a battle of a hero god with a chaos monster, often in the shape of a serpent or dragon.

Remember the *Epic of Gilgamesh*? It's the oldest work of literature that has been discovered – from probably 2,500 years before the birth of Jesus, maybe 1,000 years older than anything in our Bible and it tells of a Sumerian creation story which includes the overcoming of the world's chaos so that people could live.

Among these early creation stories – the early reflections of people wondering how this all came to be – with God winning out over chaos, the primeval evils overcome by the power of good, the calming of the storms and the demons which live in them – is that of the Hebrews in Genesis:

Genesis 1 – "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the

waters. ... And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day. And God said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. ... God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. ... So God created the great **sea** monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good."

Earth is a "formless void" – the original Hebrew and then later translation into Greek convey the concept of chaos. God's wind blows across the chaos – God's *ruach*, wind, breath, spirit. The "deep" in Hebrew is the formless body of primeval water surrounding the habitable world. The "firmament" or "dome" of heaven denotes a solid ceiling using a word rooted in the act of beating metal into thin plates. The "great sea monsters" are the creatures to which the chaos-monsters Leviathan and Rahab belong – depicted often as dragons and huge eel-like monsters.

God overcomes all that – the chaos before anything – and creates a safe space for all creatures. A safe place for humans who are created in God's image. And we are (mostly) grateful.

The Psalmists tell us over and over of God's control over chaos – the deep, the mighty sea, the monsters:

Psalm 77 – *When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they were afraid; the very deep trembled. Your way was through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters; yet your footprints were unseen.*

Psalm 106 – *[God] rebuked the Red Sea, and it became dry; led them through the deep as through a desert. So [God] saved them from the hand of the foe, and delivered them from the hand of the enemy.*

Psalm 65 – *By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance, O God of our salvation; you are the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas. By your strength you established the mountains; you are girded with might. You silence the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, the tumult of the peoples.*

Psalm 89 – *O Lord God of hosts, who is as mighty as you, O Lord? Your faithfulness surrounds you. You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them. You crushed Rahab like a carcass; you scattered your enemies with your mighty arm. The heavens are yours, the earth also is yours; the world and all that is in it—you have founded them.*

Psalm 107 – *Some went down to the sea in ships, doing business on the mighty waters; they saw the deeds of the Lord, his wondrous works in the deep. For he commanded and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea. They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths; their courage melted away in their calamity; they reeled and staggered like drunkards, and were at their wits' end. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he brought them out from their distress; he made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed. Then they were glad because they had quiet, and he brought them to their desired haven.*

Psalm 74 – *You divided the sea by your might; you broke the heads of the dragons in the waters. You crushed the heads of Leviathan; you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness. You cut openings for springs and torrents; you dried up ever-flowing streams.*

And this is exactly what's going on with Jesus and his disciples here. I think most of us when we hear this story immediately jump to the walking-on-water piece of it. True?

A pastor and two church friends were out on the river fishing in their rowboat. Twelve o'clock rolled around and one of the friends noticed a nice spot on the bank to have lunch. He turned to the other two and said, "That looks like a nice spot. What do you say we have lunch over there?" The other friend agreed, and so did the pastor. The first friend stood up in the boat, stepped out onto the river and walked over to the bank. The pastor was amazed and thought, "If *this* guy is holy enough to walk on water, I can too!" The other friend stood up, picked up the picnic basket, and she stepped out of the boat, and she also walked over to the bank and sat with the first one. Again, amazed, the pastor thinks, "Well, if *she's* faithful enough to walk on water, then definitely I can!" The pastor stood up, stepped out of the boat, and sank to the bottom like a rock. The first friend turned to the second and said, "Do you think we should have told pastor where the rocks are?"

Jesus walks on water. The disciples don't have enough faith to do the same. That's usually what we get from this story. But that's not the point. Listen again:

"When evening came, [Jesus] was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning [Jesus] came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified ..."

Jesus doesn't just walk on water. Jesus walks on **the sea** – **the sea** – a living, chaotic, potentially deadly spirit. That's what the disciples experienced. That's what the hearers of this story would have heard. This Jesus overpowers the chaos that tries to reign in this world. The sea is filled with spirits of evil, tempests, waves, wind, monsters, things unknown and frightening. When the

disciples see Jesus walking on the sea, they are not relieved, they don't shout for joy expecting that Jesus has come to rescue them from this storm caused by spirits. Instead, they are terrified. The word used here for "terrified" can also be used to describe a sea that has been agitated and stirred up. In other words, the disciples' inner state – their inward spiritual confusion – is now a perfect reflection of their outer circumstances – the wind and waves battering their boat. They are terrified because they realized that they were seeing with their human eyes events that can only happen in the realm of the spirits - their first reaction is that they are seeing a spirit. They are terrified because while spirits are everywhere in the human realm, it is deadly for humans to be in the realm of the spirits.

When Jesus immediately says to them, "Take courage, do not be afraid," he is inviting them to have *his* inner spiritual state instead of the fear and anxiety and confusion that they are experiencing. Walking on the sea is not a magic trick. After spending time *alone in prayer*, Jesus has stepped out onto the back of chaos to be with his friends.

And *that's* the point. Jesus calms the chaotic forces that try to control our lives.

What is the chaos in your life? It's not just our desks or junk drawers or garages or attics that are filled with chaos. There are places in each of our lives where destructive powers try to take over.

There are people here, I'm sure, who could tell us about the deep destructive powers in their souls who are now no longer afraid of the chaotic sea. There are others who still wrestle with the spirits of chaos and look for deliverance. And there are others, no doubt, whose fear has become inarticulate, silenced even to themselves, and who stay on concrete paths and never imagine walking out on the sea.

We all have those pains. We all have those times when it feels like chaos runs us. There are times when we need something deeper than therapy or self-help books or TV psychologists. And here it is.

That's the point of this story. I know that I have enough doubt in my faith life if I had stepped out of that boat, I would have sunk like the proverbial rock. Why deny it?

Peter steps out on faith. He doesn't act on his own impulse though. He asks Jesus to command him to come. Jesus calls and Peter gets out of the boat protected by the one who calms the sea. And for a brief few steps, he conquers the chaos of the sea – for a brief moment he is able to focus and avoid the distractions and find his spiritual center – and he walks. Yet then he notices the winds blowing around him – the distractions of his life take over – and he is right back in chaos. Instead of keeping his focus on Jesus, Peter notices the wind, and his bond with Jesus is weakened.

Peter "*begins*" to sink. Did you ever try walking on water? You don't "begin" to sink. You either walk – or you drop like a rock. You walk or you sink. So Peter cries out to Jesus – not "if it's you" please save me. He makes his commitment right there "Lord, save me." That's his affirmation of faith right there – Lord – you, Jesus, are Lord – you, Jesus have overcome the chaos. You, Jesus, can show us how to walk, how to calm the seas around us, but only if we're willing to hear and accept it, There are no if's, and's, or but's for Peter. It's simply, "Lord, save me." Jesus reaches out his hand and saves Peter. "You of little trust, why did you hold back?," Jesus asks.

The call of Jesus this morning – the reach of his hand – is our invitation to the table. We've made it so routine. You're here on communion Sunday so it's right here in front of us – we follow everyone else up the aisle and back to our pews. But this is that moment in our lives – for us each month, for other Christians

weekly or even daily – this is the reaching out of Jesus to snag us from the depths of our lives.

We cry out "God, save us" and the reply comes in this place and in these moments. Sink or walk? Come to the table where the chaos is calmed. Come through the sea that swirls around you to the boat that the church has built.

Amen.