

God with us in the storms of life

(Matthew 14:22-33 preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church August 9th, 2020)

This is Canal Rocks, a little place on the Indian Ocean just north of Margaret River in Western Australia. It is quite close to where I have seen pods of whales. It is one of my favourite spots to watch the ocean, it had little walkways between the rocks, I say had because earlier this year they were washed away in a storm. I love just watching the waves crash into the rocks and the spray that falls on you, I could watch them for hours.

This next photo is either part of London Bridge or the Blowhole near Albany in Western Australia – I only discovered this spot last year. Again, I could spend ages here. There is a Blowhole on the Great Ocean Road which my grandmother would never go to. She would give us very strict instructions about how close to the edge we could stand. In fact, she would implore my grandfather not to take us to there. Suspect she must have known someone who fell there.

Stormy seas – magnificent yet frightening.

Jesus finally gets some time to himself and goes up a mountain to pray and sends his disciples across the sea in a boat. Some of those in the boat are strong and brave fishermen, good sailors. However, a storm brews and they find themselves battered by the winds, soon they are frightened out of their wits, far from land, the wind against them. All night they battle the storm and then a figure appears on the horizon walking on the water. Even more frightened they think it is a ghost or perhaps their imaginations, then the voice identifies himself – it is I, and as he often says ‘Don’t be afraid’. Peter seems to need extra proof and asks Jesus to call him to come, Jesus does, Peter begins to walk on the water, sinks and Jesus reaches out and catches him. As they get back into the boat the storm calms and the disciples know Jesus to be the Son of God.

Matthew is the only one who records the story of Peter walking on the water, but that is a sermon for another day.

Stormy seas – magnificent yet frightening.

The story is full of symbolism. Seas then were understood to be threatening, frightening, where dragons reside, linked to the great abyss. The boat might symbolise the church buffeted by persecution and adversity. The disciples represent the journey of faith – fear and doubt, joy and trust.

We currently find ourselves in stormy seas as we get used to our Stage 4 lockdown. People are insecure, fearful, disturbed, threatened, waiting to feel safe, backs against the wind bracing themselves for what is next.

A stormy sea like the one in our story from Matthew is a metaphor for life – sometimes battered, sometimes unable to articulate what is happening and how we are feeling, experiencing twists and turns, willing to make bargains, longing for calm, sorrows and eventually joy and peace.

Rembrandt painted a scene of the disciples in the midst of the stormy sea. This picture is a representation of the story in Matthew 8 rather than this one, but I think it is still informative.

God with us in the storms of life

(Matthew 14:22-33 preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church August 9th, 2020)

Let's look a bit closer at it, the picture will be on your screen.

The picture itself has a stormy history, it was cut out of its frame in 1990 in a robbery from the gallery it was housed in and has never been seen since. The empty frame remains on the wall in the gallery, as a reminder. This is the only seascape Rembrandt painted.



The disciples are violently hurled on waves in a storm. The boat is on a 45 degree angle, throwing the observer off balance.

There are dark clouds, high waves, a torn mainsail, rocks looming large, a scene of absolute panic.



Some disciples are trying to take down the sails.

Another disciple is hanging on to the rudder, futile really as it is not even touching the water.

Another disciple is bent over the edge of the boat, vomiting.

The disciple behind him is huddled in prayer.

One (with the face of Rembrandt) is holding his hat and staring at us.

Others are just holding onto ropes as tight as they can.

Where are you? Which disciple are you?

But there are signs of hope in the picture as well – some blue sky appearing, rays of sunlight, the storm appears to be breaking.

Calm will come after the turmoil.

In our story from Matthew we see God in Jesus coming to us in the midst of the storm. Jesus appearance is almost unexpected and initially terrifying. Jesus doesn't change the situation initially, rather, he offers a hand up and utters the calming words – don't be afraid.

Like the disciples, we are in this boat together, we just need to pull in the same direction.

In our other reading about Joseph and in this story, we see God can make good out of truly awful situations.

No matter what fears, sorrows or joys we have we are never abandoned by God. God in Jesus comes with an outstretched hand offering a hand up.

Peter's experience reminds us that Jesus will always be there when we take risks, ready to catch us if we begin to sink.

Even when our fears and doubts mean we can't see Jesus clearly, he is there, ready and waiting.

I pray that all of us in the following weeks might, even in the midst of chaos, know that Jesus stands at the ready, know that you (and all of us) are not abandoned by God.

May we all in the coming weeks find a way to give a hand up to others who feel like they are sinking. May we also have the courage to take a risk or two (virtually) to encourage others, to ensure the welfare of others.

Calm will follow the storm.

Remember in the words of John Bell:

Don't be afraid,
My love is stronger,
My love is stronger than your fear.

Amen.