

The Bridgwater Drive Church, 13 Aug 2023

Call to worship (inspired by Matt. 14:22-33)

We gather together to worship God,
who comes to us when we least expect it,
who calls us out of the safety of our ordered lives
and invites us to join them in the adventure of faith.
Let's worship God together!

Hymn Dear Lord and Father of mankind MP 111

Offering

Gracious God, you call us to let go of the things we cling to
and step out in faith, trusting in Your love and provision.
Give us courage to step out boldly, and sufficient faith to follow without fear.
Take our lives and our gifts.
Use them to accomplish more than we could possibly imagine,
so that, through us, Your kingdom might come
and Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

Opening Prayers (inspired by Matt. 14:22-33)

Here, in this place, God welcomes all the dreamers, as well as the doubters:
here, the worriers and wanderers can call on God by name.
Here, in this time, we can remember all the ways God has graced us:
here, in these moments, we are reminded that God is with us, always!
Here are gathered those who dare to step out of their comfort into the unknown:
here, in this sacred space, we will find the faith to proclaim that God saves us
in every situation. Jesus reaches out his hand and guides you to the shore.

URC Prayer Handbook p45

Hymn Eternal Father strong to save MP 122

Bible readings: **1 Kings 19:9-18**
 Matthew 14:22-33

Where is the voice of God? Are we listening in the right place? In the right way? I'm not very familiar with the story of Elijah, but I was struck by the parallel with today's Gospel reading, which I have never noticed before – both stories contain storms. Without going into too much detail, Elijah is running for his life. The king's wife, Jezebel, has promised to kill him, so he's on the run. In fact, in the verses before this in chapter 19, he is so despondent that he wants to die and asks God to take his life. Coincidentally, at last week's Memory Worship in Rayleigh, my Methodist colleague, Calvin, spoke about this story to emphasize the need for us to take care of ourselves – to rest and eat. God does not take Elijah's life, instead, God provides cake and water and Elijah rests, and he then has enough strength to carry on his journey to Mount Horeb, the mountain of God, where Moses has previously had an encounter with God. Mount Horeb is also known as Mount Sinai, where Moses received the ten commandments. And that is where we now find Elijah – in a cave at Mount Horeb. And there the Lord asks him, what are you doing here? Elijah continues a bit with his 'woe is me' complaint to God – saying all God's prophets have been killed, he is the only one left,

and people are seeking to kill him. One might assume that God being God doesn't actually need Elijah to answer the question. God knows why Elijah is there, but Elijah seemingly doesn't. He gets defensive – he has been zealous for the Lord; he passes the buck – it is the Israelites who have forsaken God, he has been faithful; and he whines a bit – I'm all alone – nobody wants me, nobody loves me, I think I'll go and eat worms! Elijah is there in that very specific place to have an encounter with God. It is God's mountain – what else would he be there for? And now is when we get the parallel with the story from Matthew – there was a great wind, so strong that it breaks rocks into pieces. Presumably Elijah was afraid. He stayed in the cave. Though the narrator doesn't tell us that, but rather says that God is not in the wind. Then there is an earthquake, and God is not in the earthquake. And a fire and God is not in the fire. After the fire is the sound of 'sheer silence' and it is only then that Elijah covers his face and comes to stand at the entrance of the cave. Is it because he recognises that God is in the silence? Or is it just natural human instinct to come out and investigate once everything is quiet and the storms, earthquakes and fires have ended. We know that is what people do – once the wildfires are put out they come to survey the damage; once the aftershocks have stopped, they come out to listen for signs of life and see what can be salvaged; and once the storm has passed is when people come back to sweep out the mud and dry out their homes. In the silence, Elijah hears the voice of God again asking him what he is doing there. And he gives the same answer as before, but then God continues and tells Elijah what to do. God gives Elijah his orders, but also tells him that he will have a helper. He is to anoint Elisha to be prophet in his place. Once Elijah stops running and hiding from God and listens for God in the silence, he gets what he needs – a break from being God's only prophet, all alone and fearing for his life. Are we sometimes too busy, too caught up in our fears, or trying to blame others when things don't work out, that we can't hear the still, small voice of God in the silence?

And so, we come to Jesus and Peter walking on the water. When we hear this story, we tend to focus on Peter. If Jesus' number one disciple the one on whom he builds his church can sink due to a lack of faith, then this can happen to any of us. Peter becomes a symbol for any believer who has ever had a moment of doubt. We don't need to worry; we can be safe in the knowledge that Christ will reach out and save us when we call out to him. This makes for a good message and is of course true – we all have times of fear and doubt, and we know that Jesus will save us, but it's a bit me, me, me - this episode of Peter sinking becomes all about us and the benefits that come from being in relationship with Jesus. But if we focus on Jesus instead, some interesting insights emerge.

Matthew alludes to Old Testament stories that present Jesus doing “God acts” - words and deeds that God had said and done according to Israel’s Scriptures. And, the Gospel passage uses language that foreshadows the salvation from sin that will occur when Jesus dies on the cross. In this way, the story of Jesus walking on water becomes a bridge between what God had done in the past and what God will accomplish through Christ. Jesus is alone on the mountainside, having a break from the crowds, and from his disciples, but when a storm arises, Jesus goes to meet the disciples where they are in the boat, by walking on the water. At first glance, it’s not clear why Jesus feels the need to walk on the stormy waters. Not long before, Jesus had calmed the raging sea with no more than a word - why not do the same again? The Gospel highlights Jesus’ choice to walk on the waves as a deliberate recollection of what God did at creation. The book of Job affirms that the Creator has traversed the oceans before the dawn of humanity, saying that God “stretched out the heavens and trampled on the waves of the sea”. Matthew’s audience would be familiar with that text and that thinking. The disciples, however, do not make the connection - they’re terrified, and they think they’ve seen a ghost.

Jesus’ words to his disciples underscore his divine identity. As he approaches the boat, he declares, “Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid”. The English translation of “it is I” obscures what the Greek really says, which is “I am” - the same thing God says to Moses at the burning bush: “And God said to Moses, ‘I am’”. If walking on water wasn’t enough to show his divine status, Matthew’s Jesus repeats the very words of God. Then Peter begins to walk to Jesus “but when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’” Immediately, Jesus reaches out his hand, pulls Peter into the boat, and the wind ceases. Seeing this miraculous event, the rest of the disciples say to Jesus, “Truly you are the Son of God”. In the Matthew version of the crucifixion, which is the only one to include an earthquake, the disciples’ proclamation after Jesus saves Peter’s life will reemerge at the moment of Jesus’ death. When Christ yields up his spirit and an earthquake ensues, a centurion and his associates at the cross declare, “Truly this was the Son of God”. Notice, also the parallel with the earthquake while Elijah is in the cave, signalling the presence of God, though God is not in the earthquake but in the silence. God may be in the storm on the sea of Galilee, but the disciples only realise it when the storm ends, and all is silent. They recognise that Jesus is the Son of God in the act of him silencing the waves and stopping the wind. Yes, Jesus caught Peter and literally saved him, but he also calmed all the worries and fears of the disciples. They are no longer terrified, thinking he is a ghost, in the silence they know he is God and like Elijah have the strength to carry on, to follow where Jesus leads, even if that is walking through turbulent waters.

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Elijah ran from his troubles rather than trusting that God would shelter him from harm. In the end, Elijah had to return to the place he fled and do the work that God called him to do.

Peter stepped out in faith, but then became afraid and faltered. Elijah needed to listen for God's voice in the silence. Peter needed to hold Jesus' hand to carry on and do God's will, establishing the church. What do we need to help us keep going? God says, "What are you doing here?" What will our answer be?

Hymn Bearing all their fears & tensions (tune Picardy R&S 454) Words at end

LORD'S SUPPER

We remember, as we do at every communion service, the gift of the life and death of God's Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Come to this table, you who are beloved in Christ. Come, not because you must, but because you may.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

Loving God, the world you made is beautiful and full of wonder.

You made us, with all your creatures, and you love all that you have made.

You gave us the words of your prophets, the stories of your people throughout the generations, and the gathered wisdom of many years.

You gave us Jesus, your Son, to be born and to grow up in difficult times where there was little peace.

He embraced people with your love and told stories to change us all.

He healed those in pain and brought to life those who had lost hope.

He made friends with anyone who would listen and loved even his enemies.

For these things, he suffered. For these things, he died.

And he was raised from death and lives with you forever.

You give us your Holy Spirit, to teach and to strengthen us, to remind us of Jesus Christ and to make us one in him.

For all these gifts we thank you, and join with all your people on earth and in heaven, in joyful praise, saying:

Holy, holy, holy Lord

**God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.**

Hosanna in the highest.

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

Hosanna in the highest.

This is the mystery of faith:

Christ has died

Christ is risen

Christ will come again.

Lord God, send your Holy Spirit upon this bread and wine, and upon your people, that Christ may be with us, and we may be ready to live for you

and do what you ask of us, today and every day to come. **Amen**

On the night when he was betrayed, Jesus took bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, this is my body which is broken for you. Do this is remembrance of me. In the same way he took the cup after supper saying, this cup is the new covenant in my blood, Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Sharing of bread and wine

Prayer after communion

Most gracious God, we thank you for what you have given us.
You have fed us with the bread of life and renewed us for your service.
Now we give ourselves to you, and ask that our daily living
may be part of the life of your kingdom, and that our love may be your love
reaching out into the life of the world, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

Prayers of intercession

God, You have called us to be a people of prayer,
to continue the ministry of intercession handed on to us by Jesus Christ Himself.
And so we come before You with confidence, bringing our prayers for the world You love.
In Your mercy, hear and answer.

We pray for those who, like Jesus' disciples,
find themselves surrounded by high winds and stormy seas;
those who feel overwhelmed by events and circumstances -

the loss of a job,
the death of a loved one,
serious illness,
chronic pain,
depression,
homelessness
heatwaves and floods

and who don't know where to turn.
Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for those who, find themselves affected by our changing climate,
those who worry and are anxious about the increase in extreme weather
and who are struggling to know how to respond.

Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for those who, like Peter,
are experiencing a crisis of faith;
who long to whole-heartedly trust in God
but are held back by questions and doubts.

Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for those who, like the prophet Elijah,
have fallen into despair; who have begun to doubt God's presence and power;
or question God's call in their lives.

Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for those who have had their hopes and dreams crushed;
those whose lives have suddenly taken a different turn,
and who now wonder what lies ahead for them.

For those stuck in the asylum system, waiting for an outcome to

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move on with their lives having left war, famine or violence.
Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Loving God, it is not Your will that any should suffer.
We offer our prayers for all those who hunger and thirst,
those who live in the midst of violence or poverty,
and those who feel abandoned or ignored by the world around them.
We pray for the dying and those who mourn
and all those know to us who are ill or in hospital.
Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Through the life-giving power of Your Holy Spirit,
make Your sustaining presence known to all who are in pain or need,
so that they, too, may know Your love and grace.
In the name of Jesus Christ, who taught us when we pray to say:

Lord's Prayer

Hymn Will your anchor hold MP 770

Blessing

Jesus calls us to step out on to the water with him,
to leave the safety of our boats, and to walk toward him in faith,
joining him in the work he is already doing in our world.
And when the wind and waves get high and threaten to overwhelm us,
we remember his words: *"Don't be afraid. Take courage. I am here."*
So let's go with faith, to follow where Jesus leads,
confident that his love and presence go with us.

The Bridgwater Drive Church sung Blessing.

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