

Augusta First Baptist Church

March 4, 2007

Matthew 8:23-27

The Challenges of Faith: Coping With Loneliness

Lent 2007

NRS Matthew 8:23 “*And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. 24 A windstorm arose on the sea, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. 25 And they went and woke him up, saying, "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" 26 And he said to them, "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm. 27 They were amazed, saying, "What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?"*”

This morning we continue our Lenten journey by taking up the challenges to faith. Faith --it needs to be said up front and often, is a challenge. Last week, we looked at the challenge of doubt. This week, we are going to focus on loneliness.

In a study last year, the US Dept of Health and Human Services, published an article that stated more than a third of adults say they are lonely, especially people in their 40s ... People aged 50 and older had the lowest levels of loneliness. Levels of loneliness began to rise at age 20 and peaked between the ages of 40 and 49... People with strong religious beliefs were less likely to be lonely than people who had no such beliefs. Women were more likely to have strong religious beliefs, which may explain why women reported lower levels of loneliness than men.

Not only are many people lonely – and at one time or another we all experience this, loneliness is not good for you. According to *Science Daily*, lonely people have a higher risk of heart disease. In the journal of *Archives of General Psychiatry* – I like to browse that issue from time to time – the elderly are more likely to get Alzheimer’s if they are lonely.

I wonder if this could be the loneliest era ever in Western history. We fill our lives with so much noise to drown out this loneliness. We plug iPods in our ears, turn on the car radio the moment we get behind the wheel, our living rooms glow with the blue tones of television, and now even television has made its way into our automobiles. There are cell phones, email and internet with its Myspace and Facebook to remind us of our global connectivity. But I wonder, are these not the loneliest times of all? We have moved from the front porch to the back porch for privacy, but while doing so, we don’t even know our neighbors. Loneliness. We all know what it is like, some more than others.

There is a Psalm in our Bibles that offers a cadence of loneliness. Psalm 102: “*3 For my days pass away like smoke, and my bones burn like a furnace. 4 My heart is stricken and withered like grass; I am too wasted to eat my bread. 5 Because of my loud groaning my bones cling to my skin. 6 I am like an owl of the wilderness, like a little owl of the waste places. 7 I lie awake; I am like a **lonely** bird on the housetop.*”

While in these last few weeks, I have made various references to the familiar story of Jesus stilling the storm at sea, today, let us take a closer look. It is one of several stories told of Jesus calming a storm at sea. In fact, Matthew tells two such stories. In chapter 14 of Matthew, Jesus is not in the boat, but he has sent the disciples ahead of him while he went to a mountain to pray. In Matthew 8, however, he is in the boat, BUT, He is asleep. This story is found also in Mark and Luke.

All three gospel accounts describe the scene in pretty straight-forward terms. Jesus and the disciples get in the boat, and Jesus for some unknown reason, falls asleep. Mark adds the detail that he is asleep on a cushion. A storm arises with waves crashing against the boat. The disciples are concerned that the boat will sink and that they will perish and Jesus is still asleep. In fact, in Luke the boat is described as filling up with water

and they were all in danger. Jesus, however, is awakened, not by the storm, but by panicky disciples and someone blurts out, “Do you not care that we are about to perish?”

The Son of God is sleeping while the boat is sinking. Now, that is a feeling of loneliness like none other. Have you ever felt, that in the middle of life’s ferocious storms, you are alone? Sure, we all have. Have you ever wondered if God is off somewhere asleep or not even in the boat?

I wonder if Jesus ever felt lonely? I think he did. In fact, I am sure he did. It had to be lonely, to not be understood. The Bible stories remind us, Jesus was surrounded by people who did not understand him. It wasn’t just the religious leaders, but they certainly qualify. Jesus’ family did not understand him. There is one story in the Gospel of Mark, (chapter 3) where his family set out to restrain him, because they thought he had gone out of his mind. His family thought he was crazy. Jesus was not even understood by the people he hand-picked to be his followers, his disciples. These were not just his associates, these were his friends, his band of brothers. They just, however, could not understand this man from Galilee, called Jesus.

Surely, it was lonely when Jesus tried so hard to teach others about the love of God, and the religious leaders wanted to get into a discussion of doctrine and interpretation. It must have been lonely at the Garden of Gethsemane, where he asked God if there was some way he could get around the trial he was about to face, praying alone when others are sleeping in the night.

A few years ago, I read a beautiful novel while on the beach at St. George’s Island. It is titled *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. The author writes that in our world, we are shaped by choices made that we cannot undo, and events that we do not plan, and we only get one shot at this life – there is no rehearsal. Existence seems to lose its substance, its weight. We drift along, not anchored to anyone or anything, hence the title, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.

Is this how we want to live? Is this how God sees our existence? Drifting along, not anchored to anyone or anything? I don’t think so. If a challenge to faith is loneliness, then the crux of the faith is communion and community.

By communion I am referring to communion with God. What God desires of us is to be in relationship with us. At the creation of the world after there was light; and after the sea was formed and the rains fell, and after plants sprouted forth and animals of every kind roamed the earth, God made man and woman in God’s likeness. We were created to be in unique relationship with God. I find that so beautiful.

But we fear this communion, and so we fill our lives with divine substitutes, golden calves invented to stave off our anxieties. The Psalmist may cry out as we heard in this morning’s scripture reading “For God alone my soul waits,” (Psalm 62:1) but we fear that Jesus is asleep in the boat, or worse, not even there. We fill the vacuum with things, and yet we can never buy enough to fill the void. “For God alone” is the cry, yet, instead we surround ourselves with meaningless relationships that are based on competition, domination, success, and position. “For God alone” is the prayer, but, we choose business and activities – some even in the name of God. In truth, we fear the spaces, the stillness and the silence. After all, no one is comfortable with Jesus sleeping in the boat.

Coping with loneliness is coming to the knowledge that what you and I want is the same thing God wants. This past week, I stepped into the gym while our youth were worshipping. The speaker said something that resonated with me. He said, “To be in the presence of God, means being present to the One that enjoys your company.” I understand that. I enjoy my wife’s company, and hear me out, I am not trying to sound predictable or insincere. I really mean it. In the evenings, I can be buried in a book and Amy can be browsing through a newspaper, but she is there and I enjoy her being there. When you love somebody, you want to be in their presence because of who they are, not just because of your need.

And that is the way it is with God. I am not simply saying, we need to be in the presence of God because we are *suppose* to love God, admire God, and therefore want to be in communion with God. What I am saying is that, God desires to be in our presence, because God loves us, really loves us.

God loves us in such a way that we don't need to worry about all the silly facades we put up for others. Do you know why people in their 40's statistically are most lonely? I'll tell you what I think, after all, I am practically an expert, because I am nearly 41. At this age we seek to find identity in so many *other* things. We are trying to nail that career or promotion that will say to the world we are somebody. We are clinging to the titles and accolades and praises of colleagues. We are in the midst of raising our children whom we want desperately to be successful and top of the class because, after all, they are a reflection of us! And don't get me started at how we stockpile our lives with mortgages, SUVs, and diet pills – all in the name of a lonely image. And if we believe the surveys, we are some of the most lonely people around.

“For God alone my soul waits...” “Jesus, do you not care that we are perishing...and Jesus says, “Why are you afraid, you of little faith?”

The heart of the faith is communion with God and community with the people of God.

We need each other, because in truth, we are in the boat together. And while there will be days, perhaps many days, when the water is smooth and the ride is pleasant, there will be times when the waves beat against our sides and we think we are about to go under.

All of us – in some way or another – come here bringing our loneliness in the company of others. And this is how it should be.

It is the difference, one could say, between playing on a bowling team or a soccer team. Both are teams, but a bowling team is really just a collection of individuals. Its success is dependant upon the success of every individual. Ultimately, however, one bowls alone. Contrast this with a soccer team. Sure there are stand outs and stars, but they are all working together: kicking, passing, defending, and scoring.

Our lives are tangled up, or “caught,” as Martin Luther King put it, “in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied to a single garment of destiny.” We need each other and ***Church is where you and I come together, with all of our faults and failures and misunderstandings, and find communion and community.***

It is a lonely world out there. And sometimes, you and I will be caught up in storms that threaten to sink us. Communion with God and Community with one another will see us through to the other side.