

Storms and Picnics Week 2

Lakes are not places to be at night.

As dark draws in you lose your bearings:

the shore could be far away or very close - it's hard to tell.

The lake the disciples are crossing is not a village pond. It's about 7 miles across in one direction and 13 in the other. On a clear day you can see the other side, but this is not a clear day.

And then, as your boat is buffeted and moved by waves and wind, it becomes hard to know which way you're facing as the night swallows your landmarks. If you want to know, in a small way, what it's like try turning around a few times with your eyes shut before feeling your way, eyes still shut, across a familiar room. It becomes an alien landscape and you can often find that you're heading in a completely different direction than you thought.

So it's hard to know why the disciples would choose to set out across the lake as the evening draws to a close and night settles.

- Could they have got tired of waiting?
- Maybe, like Jesus' parents in Luke's Gospel's story of Jesus' childhood, they thought he must have gone with someone else and were rushing to catch him up.
- Possibly they got sick of being asked constantly where Jesus was, or were worried by the crowd's wish to make Jesus king and start a revolution.
- Could they have felt things were getting out of control and sought at least to determine the next place they would visit and how they would get there?
- Or maybe, shaken up by the miracles and the cries of the crowd, they want to feel the familiarity of the rocking boat beneath their feet and the oars in their hands,
to be somewhere they know what to do and how to respond,
where they can act in their own strength and knowledge..

We don't know their motivation
Whatever their reasons, set sail they did....
Rowing is hard, they feel pushed back at every stroke.
Their world becomes dark. Jesus is absent.
The light does not shine in this darkness.

Like their ancestors enslaved in Egypt, they cry out for God's presence, long for God to save them.
But, like their forefathers, they struggle on in their own strength not expecting God's response.
Rowing harder and harder in the hope that they may get to the other side.
Assuming they must go it alone.
They are engulfed, overcome by darkness, by their own hopelessness.

The nightmare feeling of struggling to move forward only to be pushed backwards overwhelms them.
It feels as if they are stuck in the middle of an endless storm in a sea with no coast.
Yet still they struggle, still they strive, hoping that this effort will make more difference than the last.
The lake is rough, a storm hits.
It's as if the storm of people's demands and disagreements, which they thought they had left on the shore, had become solid in the waves and the wind around them.
John's portrayal of the storm echoes with the chaos before the world is created in Genesis and the darkness before Word and light at the beginning of the Gospel.

The darkness and the wind buffet and batter them, yet still they struggle
- sure they can escape this hell through their own strength
Again, in their struggle we may hear the echoes of their ancestors making bricks without straw in Egypt and crying out to God to save them.
Do we hear of Moses killing an Egyptian guard in an attempt to make a difference but, only years later, finding salvation only really comes through taking his shoes off in front of a burning bush and hearing God say "I AM"?

Both struggle to find salvation through their own efforts, their constant struggle increasing the darkness and restricting their ability to see God.



Look at Maggi Hambling's painting, Good Friday (Walking on the water), from the Methodist Modern Art Collection, for a moment

What hits you about it?
How does it make you feel?

- it's the waves at the front of the picture that are striking and overwhelming. • The storm feels as if it's crashing over us and about to overwhelm us as it did the disciples.
- Are we too drawn, as the waves crash, to find our own way out?
- Are we concentrating so hard on the waves and threat in the foreground that we fail to see the indistinct figure walking towards us offering help and salvation
- Does he merge into and become one with the storm? Become part of the threat?

And so the disciples, like Moses, are in the middle of a wilderness having fled the demands and squabbles of God's people. They're in the wilderness of the lake seeking familiarity and control. Yet, like Moses, in the middle of that familiarity they experience the extraordinary.

The indistinct figure takes shape and form
they are drawn to look and to take him in as Moses was drawn to come nearer to the bush burning in the wilderness
and like Moses,
they hear God speak God's name "I AM"
the light comes
the destination is reached

Pause for a moment...

how does this make you feel?

Are there things in your life and faith at the moment that threaten you?

Or have there been times in the past when you have felt threatened by the storm?

Have you struggled on, trying to make things right, but feeling more and more overwhelmed and threatened?

This pattern echoes again and again in God's Word and in the lives of people of faith

Psalm 139 (NRSVA) tells us

*If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,*

10

even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.

11

If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night',

12

*even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.*

In times of trouble and threat and in times when we attempt to flee God, because the challenge is too great, still there God holds us and offers salvation and startling vision to draw us onward and open our hearts and minds.