

Knox Uniting Church Cluster

Sunday August 9th, 2026 – (Year A. Pentecost +11)

Sermon (reflection) by Russell Croxford at Boronia Road Uniting Church

Bible passages: Genesis 37:12-28 and Matthew 14:22-33 (NRSVUE)

“In the same boat”

PREAMBLE (early introduction to theme)

Today's theme is: “In the same boat”. In our gospel story today, we will hear a well-known miracle story of Jesus walking on the water, across the turbulent waters of Lake Galilee to a group of distraught disciples being tossed around in their boat. How might we be in the same boat today as those disciples? We also take a look at the time Joseph found himself in a pit with no way out. How might we today be in the same ‘boat’ – actually in this case a *pit* – as Joseph? What is the deeper meaning in these stories that can help us today when we face the chaos of life?

MESSAGE

How do you respond to chaos? How do you react when your life is plunged into chaos? A health crisis maybe. A relationship crisis. An overload of things to do. A loss. Are you someone who stays quite calm and controlled in the chaos? Or do you lose the plot and go a bit crazy?

In today's gospel story the disciples find themselves in the midst of chaos. The combination of wind, waves, distance from land and a boat that's about to sink all spells chaos. Things are out of control. How do they react? In sheer panic by the sounds of it.

We know that when we face stress, our bodies and minds react. We produce adrenaline. This adrenaline helps us to fight or flight. The adrenaline must have been pumping for these disciples, but they could neither fight it nor flee from it. No fighting those waves. No escaping this chaos. They were doomed. Until Jesus came to them, as he did, like a ghost, walking on the water.

It's a famous image of Jesus – walking on water. Even those who know very little about Jesus might say, “Isn't he the guy that walked on water?”. And there have been many jokes made about Jesus walking on water. Like the one about Jesus being a little boy and his mother, Mary was getting cross with him at bathtime because he kept standing on top of the water instead of getting into it! Miracles performed by Jesus are a fascination for believers and non-believers alike.

What do you make of this miracle of walking on water? It's miracle that immediately follows the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 that we looked at last week, which followed many miracles of healing people.

Whatever we think of the miraculous phenomena, I'd suggest that the actual miraculous event itself is not as important as the *meaning* of the event. We can find meaning in a passage in a few ways. Let me suggest three ways (and there are others too): Contextual meaning. The author's intended meaning. And the meaning we take from it.

The geographical context is Lake Galilee, the centre of most of Jesus' ministry. He had just dealt with a big crowd during the feeding miracle near Bethsaida on the northern shore. His next port of call was Gennesaret on the western shore. But he needed quiet time, so he ordered the disciples to go ahead in the boat. Was this a test? Did he know what would happen? Sudden violent storms were common on Lake Galilee due to the surrounding geography. The disciples were perhaps shell-shocked after the feeding miracle, and were, no doubt, on steep learning curve about Jesus and what it really meant to believe in him, when he came into their chaos walking on the water. These contextual elements create a better understanding of this faith journey the disciples were on. For the disciples, context suggests they were learning about faith in tough times and also what it means to live out that faith among needy people.

As far as the author, Matthew's intended meaning goes, there is so much we could say. Matthew so often applied Jewish themes and meanings from their scriptures to the current events he wrote about. This would have provided rich meaning to his strongly Jewish community he was writing for.

One theme here is that the turbulent sea is a common Old Testament symbol of chaos beginning in the creation story and seen also in the great flood and the crossing of the Red Sea to name just some examples. It's common in the Psalms too, as one Psalmist writes: "Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold" (Ps 69:1-2). Oceans and seas represent chaos.

Another theme here is the real identity of Jesus. When he comes towards the boat he says, "Take heart. It is I. Don't be afraid" (v27). That statement 'It is I' is essentially the same as what God said to Moses from the burning bush, when he declared he was simply 'I am'. (See Exodus 3:14). Jesus is thus being 'as God' to them. Furthermore, by walking on water, he was doing what only God did in the Old Testament. In Job 9:8 it says, "God alone...treads on the waves of the sea". Now Jesus is doing what God did. In Psalm 89:9 it says, "You [God] rule over the surging sea; when its waves mount up, you still them". What God did, now Jesus is doing. Matthew wants this meaning known in this story.

Yet another theme is 'faith' (as mentioned above in relation to context). Their faith is being surely tested. Peter, as the 'leader' of the group, is signalled out, in particular, as one who partly but not fully passes the test of faith. But it's the statement by all of them that seems to show they have at least taken a leap forward in faith, in declaring, "Truly you are the Son of God" (v 33). Faith in Jesus the man means faith in his heavenly father from whom he came.

Then there is meaning we take from the story. How are we today in the same boat as those disciples? What does *our* faith today look like when we are in the middle of chaos? And what happens to us as a result of the chaos we go through?

It's a proven fact that most growing, most learning, most faith-development comes through hardship. Not through the calm and smooth times of life, but through the turbulent times. So, in that sense, chaos helps us, as much as we don't like it.

Another biblical character who faced a lot of chaos was Joseph, the second youngest son of Jacob. In today's story from Genesis 37, he finds himself in a deep pit, miles from home, from which there is no escape. It's a helpless and hopeless situation. He was thrown into this pit by his jealous brothers who hated him because he was the favourite son of Jacob. We might therefore say that his chaos was not his own fault. He was innocent – a victim. And this is often how chaos comes to us. It's often unfair and underserved.

But was Joseph all that innocent? Perhaps he contributed to his own chaos by gloating to his brothers about his dreams of becoming superior to them one day. It probably didn't help his cause that he also brought bad reports to his dad about his brothers.

Perhaps Joseph should have kept quiet. In any case, trouble came his way, and it wouldn't be the last time, as we'll find out later when he ends up in Egypt. Again, the chaos we get into can be our own doing, or others' doing. Either way, it's chaos! So, we are in the 'same boat' (in this case, 'pit') as Joseph – and the disciples.

The important thing is our *response* to that chaos, and as people of faith, it's our faith-response that comes into question. Joseph ultimately became known for his integrity, faithfulness and care for people, that grew out of his hardship. How do we exercise faith during chaos, and come through chaos with a stronger faith?

Based on our gospel story today I see some things that may help us.

When facing crisis, let us in faith visualise Jesus standing before us, maybe taking us by the hand - which is a great image, saying to us, "Take heart. It is I. Don't be afraid" (v27). There is perhaps no statement by God the Father or God the Son in all scripture that is more reassuring than that. This "I Am" is the God of all creation, all time and all love who wants us to know Him. Let us declare, as the disciples did: "Truly you are the Son of God" (v33)

In chaos, it not only helps our faith to know *who* he is but that he is *with* us. Not remote and distant, but always with us, even when it seems he isn't. The disciples may have felt Jesus had abandoned them to their fearful plight. But he hadn't. God is always with us. Emmanuel – God with us. Can we truly place our faith and trust in that promise?

Finally, in chaos, it's actually okay to feel hopeless, helpless and out of control in our humanity. We don't have to conquer everything on our own. Sometimes we can't beat off the chaos anyway. One of the key faith lessons from this story is for us to realise we are in the same boat as Peter and the disciples, who can only cry out, "Lord save me!" (v30). Our saving can only come from Him. As the Psalmist declares, "Save me O God... I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold" (Ps 69:1-2). God is that foothold. Faith is not only believing God *can* save, but actually *asking* him to 'save me', and that's perhaps the hardest test of all.

