

Sermon - Proper 14, Year A
Our God of Surprise
Matthew 14:22-33

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It has always seemed to me to be incorrect to describe a person as “finding God.” “What happened to Jim? He’s no fun anymore!” “Ah, well, you know, he found God.” As if God were some sort of quest or treasure hunt: “why are you going to the mountain? The forest? The desert?” “Well, I’m going to find God.” Perhaps this language is helpful sometimes. Perhaps it breaks open for us a profound truth about longing or purpose. But beneath this passionate hunt for treasure lies the reality that it is always God who finds each one of us.

What happens when God finds us? What happens when we allow ourselves to be found? It would be logical to assume that we might become more like him – maybe – perhaps holier. Perhaps more full of grace. Perhaps we might become more confident and serene, wiser or more discerning. Depending on our individual tendencies to mess things up, there might be any number of graces that we might hope for in an encounter with our wild and living God. It is possible that these may come. But it is my experience that no matter who we are, no matter what we hope for, no matter which vices of ours need tempering or virtues of ours are commended - no matter how old or young or faithful or lax or pious or sacrilegious we have been – when we are found by our wild and living God, what we will always be, most of all, is surprised.

We are going to be surprised. God is, among all the rest of it, surprising. The most common experience when suddenly something tender and strange from beyond the ordinary horizon of this earthly life breaks over our heads and runs down our hearts is not some miraculous emergence of holiness, but instead the moment of the soul’s loudest exclamation of, “What. The....Heck....” Because even if things appear to be the same, everything has changed.

When God finds us – when we allow ourselves to be found – we will be surprised by the change in the world around us. The disciples thought they knew how water worked. There they were on the boat, secure in their knowledge of aquatic physics and meteorological organization. The disciples *knew* how the sea worked. And then they see someone walking upon it. A ghost, surely! They are intelligent men – physical matter like bodies does not move unbothered across the surface of water! And yet here is their teacher: “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

We think we know how things work, and yet when God finds us, perceiving the world differently is a merciful and profound surprise. The past that we believed defined us is shown to be a powerful source of our wisdom. The people we believed to be against us are revealed to be extraordinary bearers of opportunity for grace. The restlessness we struggled against is revealed to be that which will point us toward our lives’ greatest purpose. What we thought was a ghost is revealed to be our savior.

When God finds us – when we allow ourselves to be found by God – we will be surprised by the change in ourselves. All throughout the Gospels, Peter is shown to be rather impetuous. He is earnest, impatient, sometimes misguided. Sometimes afraid. And yet here, face to face with God, he steps out onto the water. Peter steps out of the boat, against all reason, showing – even for just a moment – the depth of his trust in the midst of the storm. He does not always get it right. He does not always have all of the information he needs. And yet within him burns a surprising, exceptional faith.

We think we know who we are, and yet when God finds us, we will be surprised. We will be surprised by how deliberately we have been made. We will be surprised by how beautifully even our roughest edges have been arranged to reflect God’s grace. We will be surprised by our

capacities for creativity and survival and even joy, and nothing will surprise us more than a fresh delight in our astounding capacity for love.

When we are found by God – when we allow ourselves to be found by God – we will be surprised by who God is. There is a word that occurs twice in the Gospel from Matthew today: *Εὐθέως*. “Immediately.” “They cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, ‘Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.’” “When he noticed the strong wind, Peter became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him.” At the slightest moment of need, Jesus is already there. He already speaks his words of assurance and care, he is already extending his hands. He is already catching us, indeed he has been with us all along.

We think we know something of who God is. A distant, benevolent force, perhaps. A source of love, but one who generally stays an appropriate way off. Maybe we’ve thought of God as one to be feared or avoided. Maybe we’ve wondered if God exists at all. But when God finds us, we will be surprised. We will be surprised by his immediacy. We’ll be surprised by his magnitude. We’ll be surprised by his forgiveness, and surprised most of all by the source of that same astounding love we’ve begun to recognize in ourselves.

When we are found by God – when we allow ourselves to be found by God – we will be surprised by what comes next. “When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God.’” The disciples recognize that everything has changed. The world as they knew it can never be the same. They are about to step back onto dry land and go out into a wilderness that is no longer merely a place on earth, but a world that God has blessed as the footstool of heaven. The real adventure is about to begin.

This is our adventure too. God is searching us out. When we read the Bible together or gather in worship, we are not just participating in a nice thing to do or a wholesome way to make use of our time. *We are allowing ourselves to be found.* We are attuning our hearts to better hear the still, small voice of Almighty God. We are allowing ourselves to be broken open and reborn, reawakened to a new life of grace and thanksgiving. The treasure is not something for us to hunt or to acquire. It is for us to receive...and let ourselves be surprised.

Amen.