

Unraveled #1 “That Sinking Feeling”

Sunday, July 9, 2023

Matthew 14:22-33

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In their fears, and unraveled by doubts and uncertainty, the disciples discover Jesus coming to them, saying to them, “Take heart; it is I; do not be afraid.”

Near the beach at San Diego’s Mission Beach there’s an old wooden roller coaster called the Giant Dipper. It opened on July 4, 1925, and has been running for nearly 100 years except from 1976 to 1980 when it had fallen into disrepair. It features all the high-speed dips and bends and clackety-clacking noises you’d expect – along with a view of the pacific ocean. When we were walking along the beach last week, my son Dean pointed to it and said, “Well, I know there’s no way I can get you to go on that!”

That’s the thing about being 24 – you do not consider the relative wisdom of getting buckled into a nearly 100-year-old roller coaster that climbs up 75 feet before sending you twisting and turning after you’ve had a big dinner. You do not realize that the people eating at the expensive seafood restaurant below the roller coast don’t want you adding garnishes to their dinner. You don’t think about the wear and tear that a century of ups and downs has had on the ride. So, I didn’t take his bet.

I also remembered that the coaster was three years younger than my late mother, and I had assumed she had lived a perfectly good life by never riding the Giant Dipper, either. Roller coasters don’t bother me as much as the idea of 98-year-old amusement park rides.

There’s no mention of roller coasters in the New Testament, but there are numerous references to wild and rollicking water rides. Matthew tells us about two such rides, one in chapter 8 and then again here in chapter 14. Both of them are filled with the sorts of twists, turns, rising, falling, and neck pinching stops that would be the delight of any roller coaster fans. Both are stories of God’s people experiencing adrenalin-infused moments of terror. Neither are stories of disciples piling on a pontoon boat for a gentle glide across the sea of Galilee. And even though the majority of Jesus’ followers were fishermen well acquainted with the tumult of the sea, both stories are layered in moments of fear uncertainty.

They are both stories of being unraveled.

In the first story, Jesus is napping on a boat when a storm rises up suddenly. Filled with fear, the disciples wake Jesus. “Lord, save us,” they cry. “We are perishing!” As the boat continues taking on water, Jesus wipes the sleep from his eyes, and asks them why they are afraid.

After the storm has been calmed, the disciples are amazed, wondering, “What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?”

Unraveled, they discover hope. Not just a hope that alleviates our immediate fears, but a hope that quells the uncertainty within us. A hope that brings salvation, that causes new life to rise up within us.

Certainly all of this was on their minds the next time they pile aboard that old fishing trawler to once again cross the sea. Certainly the book reeked of more than fish guts and wet nets; it carried the sweeter aroma of hopefulness and security. It is no wonder why earlier generations of Christians adopted the symbol of a boat to represent the church: it is indeed a vessel structured by hope, created to endure the turbulent waves of the world.

This would have been on their minds on this next voyage. Informed by all he had taught and all they had seen, including feeding 5,000 persons with just two fish and five loaves, the disciple's had reasons to understand that God would not be far from them in moments of unraveling.

Jesus would save them.

Yet this second story is still a bit different. The disciples have also witnessed crowds turning against Jesus—even in his own hometown. They have heard about John the Baptist's execution by Herod just to please his daughter. They understand what it truly means to experience some of life's most frightening moments.

This second story, suggests Lisle Gwynn Garrity, Presbyterian minister and artist, and the designer of this morning's bulletin art, is a story of what happens when our world begins to get frayed. Like this piece of burlap cloth, the tensions and worries of life begin to pull at one end. "How do we press onward when our tightly knit plans unravel into loose threads?" wonders Garrity. "What do we become when our identity—of the path we're on – comes undone? What if all of this is not the end we fear it will be?"

I've had my own firsthand experiences at unraveling lately. Packing up my sister's home in San Diego, sorting through all her possessions, her books and mementoes, clothing, household goods has been its own expression of watching the unraveling of her home:

The hints and clues of unraveling were around us: the birthday card purchased, written, and unsent. A note, lodged between piles of bills, which recorded the surely broken promise to meet up for lunch. Another note that said only "Ireland" with a question mark. Still another with goals: go walking, get exercise, see friends. A pile of books stacked near a favorite chair, waiting to be read. A fading whiteboard reminder, "Get dog food!"

Every room of my sister's house was brimming with well-intentioned yet uncompleted tasks. They clamored for attention like roses in bloom, popping up across rooms and nestled among artifacts. It's all a tangled mess, a skein of yarn hopelessly unraveled.

Through it all, I remember the first time my parents taught me that ancient adage about the pavement used to build the highways leading to the place of the damned. Being allowed in on their inside joke while also being allowed to say "hell" made me feel grown up. It had never crossed my mind that there were actual highways that led to hell, and my fascination that there were actual bricks formed from good intentions grew.

Peter would have understood the sort of unraveling that comes from good intentions gone awry. With the others, he watches across the storming waters. Note that this time the disciples are initially a bit bolder, less afraid. Maybe they are exhausted, worn out by the demands of the past 24 hours. Perhaps they are so

unraveled by all of what they have heard and seen that they simply do not know what else to do when a storm arises. They are holding on the way you grab the hand bar of a roller coaster.

Here they are unafraid, for the most part. They knew that Jesus had sent them ahead so that he might go up to the mountains to pray. "I'll catch the next boat," he tells them, watching them depart. And as the storms roll in, so quickly and unannounced, there is no report of their fear or anxiety.

As Matthew describes the storm, things could not be worse. The wind is against them. The waves are battering the boat, pushing it far from land. The storm continues all night long. In the early morning light, when the clouds are still low, the light poor, Jesus comes to them.

Now is the moment when they are afraid. By all indications, the storm has blown over. The water is still choppy, and they are a ways from shore, but the immediacy of danger has passed. They are like the roller coast car pulling into the final turn.

But the dim early light prevents them from seeing Jesus. They think he's some sort of ghost, a phantasm, some undefined figure walking across the water. Now they are afraid. Having endured the storms, and made it through the thunder and lightening and winds, they see this unknown figure. And they are afraid.

In their fear, Jesus speaks. "Be filled with courage. Do not be afraid. It is I."

It is I. Jesus speaks to them in the words God used when speaking to Moses through the burning bush. This is the name God uses: I am who I am. In the flames of the bush, God reveals Godself to Moses. In the moment of our unraveling, God appears. God says, "It is I."

It is the very heart of the gospel.

Filled with such joy, Peter impetuously asks if he can walk alongside of Jesus on the whitecaps. We get a sense of Jesus' sense of humor here. "Why not?" he seems to say. "Come and join me. The water's fine!"

Most of the sermons we hear in this text zero in on Peter's walk on the wild side. The story is turned into a sort of morality tale, notes Nadia Bolz Weber, such that the moral becomes if you have your eyes set on Jesus you can do anything. It is, after all, only when Peter looks down that he realizes what he is doing.

What if we changed that to asking, "Where have seen God, and what is God doing? Where is God headed? How do we see Jesus appearing on the choppy seas of life?"

The Gospel message is never about what we are doing or can be doing or should be doing. The Gospel message is that Jesus draws near to us. In our ill-fated attempts at trying to do something for God, Jesus draws near. In moments of gravest fear, Jesus brings calm. In our unraveling, when fears are rising around us, Jesus walks toward us, and even gets in the boat with us.

That is the very heart of God's promise: It is I.