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Matthew 14:22-33

DRESS REHEARSAL

Each of our lives is a story. Every one of our lives is a kind of a drama. All those event of your life--the big ones as well as the daily ordinary events--comprise a story of you. Some people will sit down and tell the story of their life by writing a memoir or autobiography. But most of us don't tend to think of our lives as a drama of much interest. We just live day by day, doing the things that life requires of us. And often, our story is only looked at more comprehensively at the time of our death, when others will reflect about our life's story, the events that took place, the things we valued or did with our lives. But the truth is, we live out a drama every day of our lives. Every day, we deal with emotions of hurt or fear, anger or joy, irritation or misgivings over any number of mini dramas and events. Every day we must manage relationships with family members, neighbors, and colleagues. There are work place tensions, conflicts with family, moments of joy and laughter around the dinner table, occasions of grace and kindness, worries we have for ourselves or our loved ones. Each day we face choices, decisions, and moments when our values or priorities are tested. There is no theme music playing as we do these daily activities, no mood lighting, but a drama is nevertheless still being played out in our daily lives.

What our faith tells us is that each one of our personal stories does not take place in isolation. Our Christian faith teaches us that our individual stories and dramas lie within a much bigger drama. Our individual stories find their meaning and take their shape in the story of God's relationship with us humans.

This is what we do when we gather for worship once a week. We are telling that story, that drama, of God's activity with humanity and how that speaks to our individual stories. But despite our neat pews all lined up in rows, worship is not a theatrical production we come to watch. Worship is intended to be a place where all of us are participants in rehearsing that story, that drama of God's activity with us and what that means for us. Think about it this way: we come here to be the cast of characters in a drama. Worship is the place where we rehearse our story, our drama, of faith.

Think about why we rehearse something. People rehearse something when they want to learn something so well they will know how to do it when actually called upon to perform it. That's what we do here in worship. For one hour a week we rehearse our story, the drama of faith, so we will know it so well for when we walk out of this sanctuary and live out the rest of our lives. In other words, worship is a kind of dress rehearsal for the drama of faith.

Our dress rehearsal begins with thanksgiving. Worship starts with words and songs that recall God's goodness to all people, God's goodness in creation. The story of your life, of my life, *begins* with God's goodness. And so we give thanks and praise to God. Hopefully we will learn this so well here that when we go out into the rest of our lives, into our own personal dramas, we will remember to give thanks and praise to God. Hopefully when life is hard, or hectic, or we are frazzled, or when we are hurt by others, or worried about life, hopefully we will at these times recall what we have rehearsed here: that our story every single day rests in God's goodness and love. We are held in the hands of a loving God.

The drama of worship also acknowledges that we do not always live out God's goodness. Every day we fall short of who God intends us to be. We behave in ways that hurt others as well as ourselves, we say unkind things, act in selfish ways, we participate knowingly or unknowingly

in systems of oppression. Society tries to tell us another story--that we are basically good people or that we can fix whatever flaws lie within ourselves or our society. But our faith story has us face that there is darkness inside all of us and that we alone cannot fix. That's what our time of confession is about. It is an honest accounting of our brokenness and our need for God. Our confession of brokenness isn't just about ourselves as individuals but how the human family is broken. Think about what took place in Charlottesville yesterday. Racism in its overt and ugly forms and in its subtle yet still damaging forms is a deep brokenness we need to confess. The human family is broken. And we confess this.

But the Christian story does not end with our brokenness. The core of the Christian story, as lived out in the drama of Jesus' life and resurrection, is about God's love, forgiveness, and power to raise us to new life. Healing is possible. We rehearse that story here in worship in our Assurance of Grace and in the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, and in our songs and prayers. We rehearse this message because sometimes it can be hard for us to remember this in our daily lives. Sometimes it can seem as if suffering, cruelty, hardships, tragedies, greed, unkindness are all that exist. And we can fall into despair about ourselves and our world. But here in worship we rehearse the important part of the drama--the part where God's love and forgiveness embrace us and empower us. We rehearse it here so that when you mess up out there in the rest of your life, you will let God's love and forgiveness enter your heart and change you. We rehearse it so that when our neighbor or family member messes up, hurts us, falls short, we will respond with the love and forgiveness we ourselves receive from God. That's why we pass the peace in worship--because we know that God's healing love reconciles us not only to God but also to one another. So we rehearse reconciliation here so we can perform it out there.

Part of our rehearsing the drama of faith involves listening to the drama told and retold. And so we read the scriptures and seek to interpret the scriptures in the sermon so we might better understand the dramatic story of God and the people of God. The human drama is all there in the pages of the Bible: stories of love and betrayal, of selfishness and sacrifice, of greed and generosity--and of God's continual love and forgiveness and transforming power.

Take today's story from Matthew's gospel as an example. To be sure, this is a very dramatic story. Jesus makes the disciples get in a boat. But he doesn't join them. He goes off to pray. But a strong and dangerous wind arises. The disciples in the boat are struggling. But then they see something amazing: Jesus is coming toward them walking on the water. And then Jesus invites Peter to get out of the boat and to come to him. Peter does, but when he realizes how powerful the wind is, he grows frightened and begins to sink. And Jesus catches him by the hand and they both get into the boat.

We could read this story as simply a recounting of a miracle. But then, what meaning would that have for us today? How would it speak to the drama of our lives if was only a one time miracle performed long ago? In truth, this story has multiple messages for our lives. There is first the personal message we could take from this story: that when the storms of life arise--when we face a job layoff, a divorce, the death of a loved one, a terminal illness, a troubled child, a difficult relationship--when the storms of life come upon us, we can count on Jesus to be there to help us through these storms.

On the other hand, we might find in this story a message for the Christian church. What if the boat of disciples represents the Christian church, rocked by forces stronger than ourselves? At such times when we feel helpless, this dramatic story could offer us a message about where to look and where to seek guidance. We might recall how God has been with the Church in past

times, seen us through other storms, provided and cared for us in ways that helped us ride out the storm.

Let us also not forget that in this passage, Jesus makes the disciples get in the boat. They were called to be in that place and in that time. Perhaps this story offers us as a church or as individuals a message for how we may be called by God to go into stormy and difficult places for a reason. Maybe we are challenged by God to go into places and circumstances that are unsettled, difficult, or scary. In your daily drama, the story of your life, what might this mean? Maybe it could involve speaking up at work about a practice you feel is wrong, or speaking up when someone makes a derogatory comment about a person of another race, religion, or sexual orientation. Maybe as a church it has involved forging a relationship with people of another religion and culture. Where are we being called into places that may frighten us, unsettle us, or where are we called to say or do things that may disturb the waters?

Remember how Peter first began to walk toward Jesus on the water but then when he took his eyes off Jesus and looked at all those big waves around him, he began to sink? What are the things that make us turn our eyes from Jesus and his ways and lead to our sinking? Fear? Greed? The desire for success or popularity? Our quest for security? Misplaced nationalism? Remember how Jesus calls Peter to come to him across the water? According to our story, whatever Jesus commands, he also makes possible. How does this message help us when we too answer the call to do something difficult or challenging?

Maybe this dramatic story could speak to us about the dilemma of what exactly it means to have faith. I think a lot of us find ourselves like Peter caught between faith and doubt. Life throws us a lot of hard circumstances. What does it mean to have faith? Is faith a possession--something we have? Or is faith a decision--like that song we sometimes sing, "I have decided to

follow Jesus"? Or, is faith words we say, "Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior"? Or is faith an activity, a daily practice we seek to live out, even when we may not always feel it emotionally. Mother Teresa's diaries reveal this was true for her, long seasons in her life when she did not *feel* the presence of God, but she still kept practicing her faith. This dramatic story makes us ponder how we approach faith in our own personal dramas.

And still yet, maybe this story can remind us that we do not face the storms of life alone. Called into the church, we support each other in our personal dramas, and we support each other in our collective drama. We face the storms together.

You see how even one dramatic biblical story can speak to the daily dramas of our lives? Here in our dress rehearsal of faith, we wrestle with the biblical story so that it can inform us, challenge us, comfort us, sustain us.

And then having heard this story and rehearsed this story of God's presence in our lives, we rehearse the ways we are to respond. And so here in worship we respond by giving our gifts, offering our prayers, re-committing our lives. Because this is what we are called to do out there in our lives: to give our gifts, offer our prayers, commit our lives to God and God's ways, day after day.

There are lots of other stories that society would have us embrace as true. There are stories that promote revenge, stories that promote selfishness, stories that tell us we should be suspicious of strangers and take care of our own first and foremost. Society's stories tell us that this is a world of winners and losers and that might makes right, to hate the stranger and harbor grudges. But we come to worship because we hold fast to another story--the only story that has the power to offer genuine life.