

Sermon
Rev. Lise Sparrow
August 13, 2023

POEM FOR THE DAY: "Ah, Ah", by Joy Harjo

Ah, ah cries the crow arching toward the heavy sky over the marina.
Lands on the crown of the palm tree.

Ah, ah slaps the urgent cove of ocean swimming through the slips.
We carry canoes to the edge of the salt.

Ah, ah groans the crew with the weight, the winds cutting skin.
We claim our seats. Pelicans perch in the draft for fish.

Ah, ah beats our lungs and we are racing into the waves.
Though there are worlds below us and above us, we are straight ahead.

Ah, ah tattoos the engines of your plane against the sky—away from these
waters.
Each paddle stroke follows the curve from reach to loss.

Ah, ah calls the sun from a fishing boat with a pale, yellow sail.
We fly by on our return, over the net of eternity thrown out for stars.

Ah, ah scrapes the hull of my soul. Ah, ah.

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 14: 22-23

14:22 Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds.

14:23 And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone,

14:24 but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them.

14:25 And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea.

14:26 But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear.

14:27 But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

14:28 Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."

14:29 He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.

14:30 But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and

beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!"

14:31 Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

14:32 When they got into the boat, the wind ceased.

14:33 And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

“Falling Down and Getting Up”

When it comes to Peter in the Bible there is a lot to do with water!

First, he has grown up as a fisherman who earns his livelihood in a boat off the Sea of Galilee. When Jesus first calls him to discipleship, we find him and his brother, Andrew, are in that boat and they leave their nets to follow Jesus.

Peter was one of the disciples in another boat when Jesus calmed the wind and water in another storm and later, on Easter morning, when Jesus appeared to the brothers again, Peter jumped into the water and swam to him with great exultation.

Peter was likely as familiar with his boat and the Sea of Galilee as the indigenous people swimming and pushing out their canoes were in the poem by Joy Harjo--- “racing into the water- lungs beating”- as he jumped out of the boat and swam to Jesus—and as familiar with the water at night when, as the poet writes...”the stars are thrown like a net across the sky.”

So why, we might ask, do we find him here at night in a stormy sea calling out for Jesus?

It is no coincidence that, like last week, Jesus has gone to the mountain to pray-- while the disciples go ahead in a boat along the shores of Galilee. It was the easier way to travel and allowed them to rest after the days. Last week the disciples called to Jesus because thousands were gathered to hear him and were hungry --and this week, he hears their cries from the sea as he tries again to rest alone on a mountain. Last week he provided the sustenance they needed and this week he comes to them in a chaotic storm, not with them in the boat --as he had been in Matthew 8- but this time, seeing him walk on top of the sea itself, they are terrified. "It is a ghost!" they cry out in fear. In Matthew 8 the disciples were amazed and asked, “What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!”. Now they think he is a ghost and by the end of the chapter they are exclaiming, “Truly He is the Son of God”.

So, the first big focus of this story is this true nature of Jesus...

Christ is more than food which satisfies, more than power over storms, Christ comes in the midst of chaos and reaches out his hand in love and when Peter begins to sink, Christ encourages him to rise and walk again.

As Cheryl A. Lindsay writes in the UCC Sermon Seeds¹,

¹ <https://www.ucc.org/sermon-seeds/sermon-seeds-for-faith/>

“they are in the boat, but they aren’t fishing for food. Jesus had promised to teach the disciples to fish for people; in this moment, he invites them, and us, to cast the net for faith.”

So that leads us to consider the real point of the story, which focuses on Peter and what it is to be a disciple. I have a favorite quote I have framed in my office along with 2020a photo of monks in their habits in various stages of falling



Linda DeGraf © down and getting up. It reads: “ Many years ago, I asked Fr. Aiden, the abbot at St. Anselm's Benedictine Monastery in Washington D.C., "What do you do at the monastery?" Aiden's reply has stayed with me: "We fall and get up. We fall and get up. We fall and get up again." He continues..”That has also been my experience with trying to establish a daily practice of prayer... but gradually I began to soften to this lawful falling away from myself and getting back up, not just while sitting on the morning chair, but as I went throughout the day.”

I’m sure many of us identify with this most human aspect of ourselves as we strive to do new things. And that, of course, is the point. It is Peter who sees Jesus walking and wants desperately to follow him and yet begins slipping into the sea.

Lindsay writes: “Peter was an interesting character who seemed to have more issues than strengths. He displayed a distinct and consistent lack of patience. He was impulsive and did not seem to think before acting or speaking. Yet, Jesus chose him to fulfill a particular role in leading the early church. Peter is seen again and again as desperately wanting to be the true disciple, the embodiment of Jesus, and again and again he fails.

*Anna Case-Winters*² writes that, “in his mix of faith and doubt, Peter exemplifies the experience of most followers of Jesus. The “archetypal disciple,” his experience is our experience...When called upon to watch with Jesus, Peter falls asleep (26:37, 40). When Jesus stands arrested and accused, Peter bravely waits nearby in the courtyard, but to all who question him he denies ever knowing or being with Jesus (26:69–75). It is this same Peter who steps out in faith to walk on water but finds himself frightened and sinking until Jesus takes his hand.”

Faith comes through the journey. In Matthew 13, Jesus explains the power of

² Ibid.

faith using the analogy of a mustard seed. In other words, it starts small and grows by pushing beyond barriers.

Our faith takes us to the edge of our courage, to the boundaries of our comfort, to the brink of what is possible. In this passage, we see a demonstration of how the faith of the disciples has bloomed since the first difficult sea crossing.

Last night when I had the sermon finished and printed I was pondering this fear of faithfulness, I happened upon an article in the Atlantic about a woman who had been abducted by a man who had killed many women. He met her in a Kmart parking lot and forced her to drive her SUV away with him. The woman had not been raised in a faith tradition but she had, over the years, become quite devout and kept a small black book of bible verses and reflections. The man was searching her purse and found the book and began asking her what it was-- and what she believed about God and forgiveness. Over the course of six hours she courageously began to talk with him about her faith, his struggles and about whether he could be forgiven. Ultimately she convinced him he could go to a monastery and confess and she dropped him at a bus stop with money for the bus to take him there. She drove home where her husband was waiting-- overcome with worry. He convinced her to call the police and sure enough, the kidnapper was still at the bus stop and was apprehended. The woman and her kidnapper became correspondents and she visited him the day before he was executed. She was forced out of her secrecy by faith and it saved her life and in some way, his.

Like the paddling of oars through water we move forward, stroke by stroke, finding a rhythm in our lives, a unity with God --only to have it disrupted again and again...

Harjo's poem catches both this disruption and the unity possible

The crow disrupts the palm tree by making noise and landing on it. The humans disrupt the crashing ocean by heaving their canoes into the waves, pelicans disrupt the fish in the ocean so that they can have something to eat, humans disrupt the waves by racing into them. planes disrupt the sky-- and yet, in the last two stanzas, humans, nature, and the inanimate breathe together in unity. Ah ah.

Just as Peter for a few moments feels the water beneath his feet and the hand of Jesus holding him up, just as he glimpses for a moment what is possible through faith.

"Ah, ah scrapes the hull of my soul. Ah, ah."

Let us pray:

Breathing and breathing out we ride the waves of our lives

Breathing in and breathing out

Step by step

We catch the rhythm of our souls
Reaching out in faith
We trust that You are there for us and with us.
Always and ever.
And for this we give you thanks. Amen.