

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 1 November 2020

Joshua 3:7-17, Matthew 8:23-27

O God, our guide, set your path clearly before us and lead us to follow you willingly for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Crossing the troubled water

Crossing the troubled waters is our theme to explore today. In both stories, faith communities are about to cross troubled waters which seems very difficult to manage. In one way, people's faith in God is tested. In another way, it reveals God's faithfulness in this covenantal relationship with His people. It shows that God not only let them cross the troubled water safely, but their faith in God is also strengthened. Through this, we'll see what it means to cross the troubled water as a faith community in the present context.

In Joshua 3:7-17, the Israelites found themselves in troubled waters when they approached the River Jordan. The Promised Land was on the other side. This was the last major obstacle that stood in their way of reaching their goal. Under the leadership of Moses, they had crossed the Red Sea. But, now Moses was gone, and Joshua was their new leader. Would he be up to the test? Could he lead them to cross troubled waters?

In addition, it was during the flood season. The waters of the river were abnormally high. God told Joshua to walk to the river's edge and stand still. Instead of building a bridge, Joshua was instructed to select one man from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. They were to go ahead of the people and stand in the river. Then the priests, bearing the Ark of the Covenant would pass by. When their feet dipped in the water, the waters abated, and a dry strip of land appeared, which enabled all the people to cross the river basin. The priests remained in the middle of the river until every person had safely crossed over.

The Lord told Joshua to "stand still in the waters" of the Jordan. Unlike Moses, who raised his staff to part the waters of the Red Sea, Joshua was instructed to wait. For us who live in a society that wants everything now and expects everything to be done immediately, to keep this kind of instruction seems impossible. Yet in this story, the priests waited, as they stood in the middle of the river. They stood there with the Ark of the Covenant as all the people passed by. They couldn't leave their position, although there was a wall of water on either side of them. They had to be patient. They had to wait.

In the Ark of the Covenant was the Law of Moses. The Law of Moses was symbolic of the presence of God. Consequently, the Israelites believed that God was with them as they traveled between the waters of the river. As such, the stillness in the presence of God helped them overcome the fear of crossing the troubled waters. People followed their leaders and instruction. They crossed the river safely. In Matthew 8:23-27, we will see the same trust and the stillness in the presence of God.

Matthew begins by telling us; "Now when He got into a boat, His disciples followed Him" (v. 23). That word "follow" is connected to the preceding passage in which two men had sought to follow Jesus. But they didn't seem to make it. Not everyone, after they count the cost, is willing to accept the challenge of following Jesus. But the men who entered the boat with Jesus apparently did. As Jesus got into the boat to cross over to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, they "followed."

Now they meet this remarkable storm. The Greek word that Matthew uses to describe it (seismos- σεισμός) is one that means "a shaking" or "a quaking". It's the word that's ordinarily used to describe an earthquake. Luke tells us that this was a product of a great wind that suddenly came down upon the lake (Luke 8:23). When Mark tells us about this

same story, he says that the boat was already filling (Mark 4:37). Even for the experienced fishermen, the storm was extraordinary. The men in the boat were certain that they were about to die; because they cried out to Jesus that they were "perishing." But Jesus was asleep despite the raging waves and storms. He was resting in the stillness of God's presence. When they woke him up eventually, "then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm."¹

In both stories, crossing the troubled waters is done while being in the stillness of God's presence. They are the stories of trust, faith and patience of God and God's people. Joshua trusted that God would hold back the waters and make a bridge for his people. God trusted that Joshua would do as he was told. The people trusted in their leader, Joshua, to lead them to the other side of the river. In the case of Jesus and the disciples, the same aspects can be seen. Even though their experiences as fishermen told them otherwise, the disciples didn't try to abandon the boat, but they woke up Jesus. Jesus saw their little faith and rebuked the winds and the sea. In doing so, he not only made the winds and the sea calm but also made the disciples' troubled hearts calm, too. As seen, crossing troubled waters is not just about controlling the weather or the raging waters or a kind of a miracle only. They are about our little faith that can easily be swayed by any life events. But it also tells us how much God is faithful to this covenantal relationship, and act on it. But crossing troubled waters do not end here.

For the Israelites, their journey was not complete. Once they crossed the troubled waters, they would face opposition in the form of armed nations. What the event did for them was give them hope and remind them that whatever they faced in the future, God would be with them. As for the disciples, crossing the sea of Galilee this time was not the end of their journey either. They, too, had to cross many more troubled waters, including their beloved Lord's crucifixion and resurrection.

In our Story time, we watched a short video clip about a sea turtle, namely 'Dune' as he has to overcome many more dangers to live in the troubled waters. The sea where he lives is full of toxic chemicals, pollutants including plastics, rubbishes. On top of it, the sea is getting warmer due to human activities. The rising temperature of the sea has affected the population of male turtles. Researches show that in the pacific region, 99 percent of green sea turtles are female. The sea turtles like Dune have been around since dinosaurs roamed the earth, more than 100 million years. The question, - 'what is crossing the troubled water for the turtle?' doesn't seem easy to answer. For the sea turtles, we human beings seem to be their biggest troubled waters to cross. Further their ordeals symbolically tell us that we haven't been faithful stewards of God's beloved creation. The sea turtles as much as God seem to wait for us to do our commitment to keeping them safe. But they are not the only species which are waiting for our work. "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God."² Faith in Christ not only makes us the children of God, but it also requires our work as faithful stewards of God. The work seems daunting. Yet we are no longer afraid of troubled waters as we are not alone in this boat, but with and in Christ. May God help us and make crossing troubled waters be our ongoing transformation until the whole creation obtains the freedom of the glory of the children of God. Amen.

¹ Matthew 8:26

² Romans 8:19-21