



We'll Understand it Better By and By

Matthew 14:22-33

Rev. Dr. James G. Daniely

February 6, 2022 (Roberts Memorial UMC)

February 13, 2022 (Washington Street UMC)

“And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” (Matthew 14: 25-27)

We know the context of this familiar text...Jesus, is training his disciples by revealing who he is. Gradually, they see hints, but haven't grasped the total picture yet. Isn't that just like us? Life must reveal to us through the vicissitudes of our journey, if we pay attention, for us to glean who he is and more importantly, who he can be if we let him. So, on this morning, after providing nurturing words for the soul and sustaining food for the body, some say as many as five thousand, Jesus has dismissed the crowd, gone away to pray, and now is re-uniting with the disciples. He has communed with the Father and now returns to the children. They are facing a crisis, not just the storm, but also a crisis of faith. Yes, they were experienced seamen, having faced storms on the sea before, but there was something different this time. Was it the waves battering their vessel? Was it the water coming into their vessel? Or was it their superstitions in believing in ghosts? I cannot definitively tell you what their particular issue was...it may have been all three! Have you ever been in a small vessel in stormy weather? It can be a scary scenario, even for persons accustomed to being on the water. But ghosts?

As a child, a favorite past time of my older siblings was to tell ghost stories late at night. They thought I was fair game for their taunts, and I'd run and tell Mother to make them stop. She would laugh and say, “Don't be afraid of the dead baby, it's those who are alive that will hurt you!” While they should have been comforting, they'd get me every time! Over time I was able to dismiss them and their stories, but my young mind had to work hard to overcome my fear. So, I understand the notion of ghosts...how about you? Are their unreal things that cause you to be afraid? Well, if so, listen to Brother Tindley, “Courage my soul, and let us journey on, Though the night is dark it won't be very long.” You see the darkness of night has a tendency to obscure our vision and our imagination can be hyped. If circumstances are right, they are magnified by our imagination, turning a routine situation into something daring or grave. Perhaps, this describes what was happening with the disciples.

If we project this hypothesis into the words of Mr. Tindley, our minds can produce innumerable situations where his encouragement to be courageous would resound with his people. Can you think of some circumstances where newly liberated people might be told to take courage? If you can't, let me inform you of the times these folk lived and journeyed on. Mob violence was rampant in major cities, white mob violence against blacks! Between 1890 and 1900, over 1600

black men and women were lynched in America. That's enough to put fear into the hearts of people. Unemployment in the nation was high, and the data among people who looked me was higher. If you cannot provide for our family, that's enough to make you fearful. To complete the imagery, soup kitchens were scarce, although Tindley's church operated one, but can you survive on one meal a day and that being soup?

Into that background, hear him differently when he proclaims, "Thanks be to God, the morning light appears, and the storm is passing over, Hallelujah!" It's not over yet, but I see that God is intervening...God is utilizing us to assist in the feeding, the clothing, and the housing of God's people...This too will pass! Courage my soul, not take courage, but be courageous as you participate with God in enduring this storm. He was invoking the power of God into their lives and into the face of persecution. Was he preaching? Of course, he was! But more than that he was praying and pleading!

Sadly, some things haven't changed very much. New forms of intimidation are on the horizon which have replaced lynching. Their effect is similar though I name some: police brutality, no knock warrants, stand your ground, etc. If I was in some place other than America, I might be surprised. But somewhere I read: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." So, I say be true to what you put on paper! If you didn't mean it, don't write it. When it's written, I might get the notion that it just might apply to me!

Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagan, in her book, *We'll Understand it Better By and By*, is quoted as saying, "violence was so overwhelming in Philadelphia, that the University of Pennsylvania commissioned Dr. W.E.B. DuBois to do a study in South Philadelphia because they thought a powder keg was about to erupt." Members of Tindley's church were included in the report because many of them were the victims of mob violence. Tindley himself, while leading a protest regarding showing of the movie, *The Birth of a Nation*, was brutally beaten and his friend and co-leader, the Rev. Wesley Graham was killed. So, when he says, "My soul is filled with fears, the seas are breaking in. I hear the Master cry, "Be not afraid, 'tis I," and the storm will soon be over, Hallelujah. Once again, here is a projection or a plea for God to intervene on behalf of his community. His songs had real meaning to his people in addition to supporting his sermons. It is said that he wrote the hymns to supplement his sermons because a song could be repeated verbatim, but the spoken word often drifts away from memory.

As I conclude, take note of the text for today and remember that when we appropriate it for real life, our fears aren't necessarily of ghosts and things. Our fears are built on concrete circumstances which can impact our walk with God. Tindley concludes his hymn with these words, "Soon we shall reach the distant shining shore. Free from all the storms we'll rest evermore..." Sisters and brothers, he says "we shall"; it's going to happen. The question we must ask ourselves is something like this, "Will I labor to help others to reach that shore, or will I be an impediment to their journey? Will I fight for the least, the lost, and the left out or will I stand in their way?"