

Stay the Course (Matt. 14:13-21)

This remarkable story that Jamie read for us is recorded in all four of the gospels, meaning that it held great significance in the minds of the writers. With the exception of John's gospel, the accounts tend to be rather brief in the telling, and much of our focus tends towards the miraculous element of it and understandably so. But as you'll recall, Matthew begins this story with this preface: "When Jesus got the news..." Unless you're reading the chapter straight through from its beginning, you're wondering, "what news?" If you read the preceding section, you discovered that the news Jesus got was about the death of John the Baptist. When he got that news, Matthew tells us, Jesus slipped away by boat to an out-of-the-way place by himself.

I don't want us to rush by this sentence, because this describes Jesus' frame of mind as he sought solitude. He slipped away to grieve the loss of John, his relative, friend, co-worker, a key figure in the plan of God, an effective prophet who had popular appeal used powerfully by God armed simply with a compelling message—no miracles or supernatural powers but a message about the coming of the messiah. Jesus himself had identified John as the figure of Elijah who prepared his way, this itself a mystery of sorts in the faith of Israel.

In his day, Elijah was a powerful prophet who had turned Israel back to God during a critical time in Israel's history, and as the result he was threatened with death by officials and suffered intense depression because of it. Through a dramatic encounter with God in the wilderness, Elijah emerged from that depression re-energized for further service. His successor was identified and mentored, and then Elijah was gloriously caught up to heaven in a whirlwind with a chariot of fire. It was an astonishing end for a faithful prophet of God.

Perhaps, then, because of John's figurative representation of Elijah, Jesus anticipated a similar, glorious finale for John. Instead, John met an ignoble end—imprisoned by Herod, depressed in prison to the point where he pondered whether or not Jesus was, in fact, whom John believed him to be. Not miraculously delivered from prison, John was quietly executed through the whim of a weak-willed despot manipulated in a moment of carelessness. John's followers retrieved his body, gave it a reverent burial and reported what had happened to Jesus.

This news came to Jesus on the heels of his rejection by the people of his home town. Those who had known him growing up, those who had befriended him, who should have received him warmly and been his comfort as opposition from religious leaders was mounting. With that rejection fresh on his mind, he received the news about John, and he retreated seeking solitude, and undoubtedly prayer, to ponder how his public ministry was unfolding.

In this frame of mind, the grief stricken Jesus, lamenting John is perhaps wondering what God was up to given the course of events. Why would God allow John to suffer such a fate? Why wasn't there a dramatic turn of events for John as for Elijah? And so Jesus, momentarily alone, in sorrow, was seeking God, pondering.

But as was often the case, word got out that Jesus was nearby, and by the crowd converging on him, Jesus knew his solitude was over. What was his response as people streamed towards him? It could have been indignation, frustration, anger, or resignation. Matthew tells us, "when Jesus saw them coming, he was overcome with pity and healed their sick." Whatever else might have been brewing in his mind, compassion led his response.

Of course, we're not privy to what occurred during the period of solitude Jesus did manage to find. That's a key element of solitude. It's not about disclosing the "deep secrets" of God or having bragging rights about superlative experience. The benefit, or outcome of solitude is revealed in actions and the life steeped in it. And, for the most part, at least in terms of my own experience with it, solitude is more along the lines of assurance that one is in the grip of God's love and care—that God is with you, and for you. It's not about gaining insider information or receiving strategy for what to do. It is

knowing that you are enveloped in God's Spirit, that you are awash in God's character, and that this knowledge, meaning this experience, this first-hand knowing of God's presence forms you for whatever is ahead of you, because you are assured that God is at work and will sort out all the big issues that may seem insurmountable as you attend to the present and respond to what's right in front of you with the grace God provides.

I imagine something like this sustaining Jesus in this moment of grief that overwhelmed whatever other emotions were gnawing at him. Jesus saw the crowd approaching and what was true about God in him emerged in the form of compassion for their plight. His response revealed the fundamental character of God, that of care for and love towards the ones who **are** seeking what only God can provide. Jesus set aside whatever was not in his grasp at the moment—the rejection of others, the shameful treatment of John—and acted in love with what was in his grasp. His purpose was clear: stay the course, continue in what you know to be consistent with God's character and intent, and count on God's energy working to enable him to do what was needed even though he might have felt incapable of it at that moment.

So Jesus healed the sick, perhaps tearfully as he struggled with his own grief. In the parallel accounts of this event we learn that he also taught the crowd, maybe with an occasional catch in his throat as he remembered John engaged in this same role. As the day rolled on, mealtimes came and went unmet as crowds had come without provisions, but they remained hanging on to this time with Jesus. The need for food became apparent, and instead of consigning people to fend for themselves in their immediate need, Jesus took whatever meager resources could be found and trusted that God would make it work. God had been faithful to the wilderness generation by providing food for them in their need. A brief obscure passage in 2 Kings 4 records a moment in Israel's history where a meager supply of food for a few fed many under the direction of Elisha. There was precedent for this in the history of God's faithfulness for the provision of basic needs, so Jesus confidently received whatever was at hand, thanked God for it, blessed it, and instructed the disciples to begin handing it out—and the basket was never empty—God made it work, so much so that there were leftovers.

What's the point of this for us?

There's little argument that we're in a time of collective grief for a number of reasons. And in that grief there is anxiety. COVID-19 remains a blight and there is worry about infection and its seeming intractable course. As a result we've experienced disruption of life as we've known it. As one columnist put it, the stuff of life that makes life worth living are the very things of which we're currently deprived—there's grief over the loss of life from this, there's grief over the suffering of those hospitalized, there's grief among medical workers that their best efforts are often not enough. We're experiencing social unrest—there's grief in the persistent presence of racism, there's grief in the loss of civil political discourse. There's spiritual disappointment—grief in the seeming absence of God in this. Grief in the silence of God when we ask why this is happening. Individually and collectively our frame of mind is swirling with emotions: despair, frustration, fear, cynicism, anger—which of these will condition our response?

But the good news is that Jesus knows what you're experiencing—he has been there. He is familiar with your situation—He has not left us to our own devices, Jesus knows the way out of it as he demonstrated in this moment from his life.

Find and cultivate some place and time of solitude where you can be alone with God, though it might seem impossible or cut short by others crowding in on you. Grab whatever alone time with God you can, and hear God give assurance that you are held in God's love and care for you. Let yourself be engulfed in God's character and Spirit. Don't spend that time telling God what you think God should do. Instead nurture trust that God is at work in all of this even though that may not be clear to you. This is not wishful thinking, it's what Jesus called faith, confidence in the faithfulness of God. Invite God to form you in the character of Christ. Let what is true about God be true of you.

From that place of assurance, count on God's energy at work in you. That's the definition of grace for the Christ follower. God's power working in you to do what you cannot do in your own strength or energy. Let God direct your attention and actions to what is right in front of you, that which is within your grasp, your sphere of influence. The size of that sphere will be different for all of us—don't measure your faith and response in a comparative manner. Some of us will have many in that sphere, others just a few—the point isn't how many, but how faithful we are in it. Whatever is within your grasp, determine to let the character of Christ guide your actions in living out the kingdom of God as you attend to needs before you in the love and purpose of Christ.

Even if you think you've got nothing to give, let the energy of God mingle with your meager resources and watch what develops as you trust God for outcomes. Stay the course, continue in what you know to be true of God, allow the love of God to pour over those right in front of you. Be the vessel of God's love and grace, and watch God work in ways beyond your imagination. AMEN