
Calling on the name of the Lord

Matthew 14: 22-33 & Romans 10: 5-15

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on August 7, 2011 by Dr. Christy Lohr Sapp

“Call me if you need anything.” Have you heard that from a colleague or neighbor? Have you said it recently, yourself? It’s an innocent and well-meaning statement meant to convey our willingness to help someone in need. “Call me if you need anything” can mean “I’ll bring you groceries,” or “I’ll watch your kids.” It is a phrase we use often enough, and it is a phrase that I think has taken on a meaning that is quite the opposite of what it is intended to convey. “Call me if you need anything” is supposed to be a statement of selfless giving of our time and resources. But, much like “We should get together for lunch sometime” it has become one of those things that we say when we want to be nice but don’t want to commit. “Call me if you need anything” makes us feel good about ourselves for being thoughtful and generous enough to make an offer of help, but it is not the same as simply turning up at someone’s door with a casserole and a loaf of bread when she is sick. It is not the same as mowing a neighbor’s lawn because we know he is overwhelmed with work or has a sprained ankle.

How often do we say “Call me if you need anything” while also hoping that the person to whom we are speaking will not actually take us up on it? Most often they don’t, and we are relieved about that. When was the last time someone actually said to you, “Well, since you offered, I do need ... help with my housework” or “a ride to the doctor’s office” or “a ride to church” or “a hundred bucks.” The problem with a phrase like “Call me if you need anything” is that it is non-committal. It puts the responsibility for articulating need back on the recipient of the offer and not on the giver. It forces our friends to ask us for help. Yet, are we attuned enough with the needs of those around us to be able to provide assistance without specifically being asked?

On the other hand, when we find ourselves on the receiving end of the “Call me if you need anything” statement, how often are we – self-reliant, independent people that we are - willing to ask for help? Sometimes we don’t even think we need help until it arrives. When that happens, when our needs are anticipated and met by others, how do we react? Are we grateful and surprised, or annoyed at the intrusion?

“Call me if you need anything” is a subtle theme we hear in both the epistle and gospel readings for today. In Romans we are told that “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved”, and in the Matthew text, Peter calls out “Lord save me!” when he

begins to sink. But, unlike the non-committal platitude “Call me if you need me,” the calling on the Lord that we encounter this morning is a reminder that God in Christ is already in our midst, saving us even before we call out for him.

Today’s readings represent three examples of how God meets us. In the Matthew text, Jesus meets the disciples *where* they are (in the boat), *as* they are (full of fear and doubt), and then *remains* with them. In the same way, when we are sinking, when we fear that God is far away, when we call out in terror or in pain, God meets us where we are, as we are, and remains with us to the end.

(1) Let’s take a look at the action in Matthew again: The disciples are in the boat, tired after a long day of working the crowds around Jesus and then struggling against the wind to get to the other side of the lake. They have been at it all night, and *early in the morning Jesus came to them on the sea*. The emphasis here is on Jesus’ activity – not the walking on water part which is, admittedly, not something one sees everyday - but on the coming to them. The emphasis is on that phrase “(he) came to them.” Jesus did not send the disciples out in the boat and say, “I’ll be up on the mountain praying, but call me if you need anything.” Instead, he simply saw their need and came to them.

Jesus left the shore and went to the disciples unbidden. Before Peter left the boat, Jesus was already there offering words of comfort and reassurance, “It is I, don’t be afraid.” Before Peter began to sink, Jesus was already there ready to lift him up and help him back into the boat to safety.

In his own saunter across the water, Peter demonstrates the knowledge that we hear echoed in the reading from Romans that all who call on the name of the Lord will be saved. It is worth noting, however, that Jesus does not save Peter merely because he is brave enough to leave the boat or merely because Peter calls out “Lord save me!” Presumably, if Peter had just waited, Jesus would have joined them all in the boat without the drama of the leap of faith and the watery rescue. This is because Jesus was already on his way to them even before he was called.

The same holds true for us, as well. We must be careful, though, not to believe mistakenly that it is *we* who do the saving through our calling rather than *God* who does the saving through his loving. We are not saved because Christ has the power to walk on water. Rather, we are saved because Christ has a love that reaches out and lifts us out of our distress.¹

¹ Richard Carl Hoefler, “I Knew You’d Come!”, C.S.S. Publishing Co, Lima, 1980, p50.

(2) Jesus was also there to save the disciples even though their faith was not perfect. Peter and the disciples did not need to prove themselves worthy in order to be saved. They all were terrified and called out in fear. In the same way, Jesus comes to us and meets us in the watery depths of fear and doubt.

My experience as a child learning to ride a bike was a bit like Peter's experience getting out of the boat. My bike was yellow and had a white plastic basket with plastic yellow flowers on it, and I could not wait to ride it around the neighborhood with my friends. So one weekend, my father took me up to the baseball field at the school near our house to teach me how to ride. He did the typical dad-thing in which he held the back of the seat to steady the bike and ran along beside it while I pedaled. We did that a couple of times around the baseball diamond with me wobbling on the bike and saying "Do you have me? Are you holding on?" Then, the time inevitably came when I asked those questions and turned to look over my shoulder to make sure he was still there only to see him back at home base while I was almost to first. Of course, I fell. And I cried, "You were supposed to be holding me!" And, my father responded with a phrase that I heard often from him as I was growing up: "Oh ye of little faith; you were doing just fine." Like Peter, though, when I noticed that I was out there alone, away from the security of my father, I fell.

When Peter is sinking down, the only thing that can save him is the outstretched hand of Jesus. Both Peter and I demonstrated a human lack of confidence, but when it comes to salvation and support in life's difficult moments, God is there with us even when we doubt, even when our faith is little, even when we are afraid, even when we deny Him.

Have you ever felt that your faith was too small to get you through a difficult situation? Or, do you ever think that you are unworthy of Christ's love? You're not alone. You are not alone because we all have those moments, but you are also not alone because God is with us regardless of our own strength and courage. In his writings, Martin Luther stresses that God fills us best with his grace when we are empty and wrung-out. It is when we feel weak, vulnerable and unworthy that there is room for God to take over in our lives and save us. The good news of this gospel story is that even when we falter and take our eyes off Christ, he never takes his eyes off us.² Jesus comes to Peter, and to us, in the midst of peril. He comes before he is called on, and the salvation he provides comes from him reaching out his hand to us.

² Richard Carl Hoefler, "I Knew You'd Come!", C.S.S. Publishing Co, Lima, 1980, p49.

(3) At the end of the text, Jesus also got in the boat and stayed with the disciples. He is not a mysterious super hero who saves the people from evil then disappears. He does not offer help on the run. Instead, he remains. He endures. He sees the disciples safely to land. He is present with the disciples in their terror and in their relief, in their pain and in their joy. He is a constant presence – with the disciples and with us.

Desiring a relationship with us, God *meets* us where we are through the Incarnation. Through the ministry of Christ, we learn that God accepts us *as we are* despite our fragility and sin. And, through the promise of the Holy Spirit given at Pentecost, we are assured that God *remains with us*: “Remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Matt 28:20).

But what do we do when we do not remember this? What do we do when we fear that we are sinking or feel alone and forgotten by God? For starters, we can remember the words of today’s epistle: “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart.” Christ is the Word made flesh who speaks a word of salvation in the midst of uncertainty and danger. Jesus does not speak a word to us from the shore, rather he ventures out to his people; he draws near and dwells with us. He struggles with us through the darkness and remains in the bright light of day.

Christ, the living Word, meets Peter in his terror; he is a word of salvation in the midst of the storm. And, even though it might not always feel like it, even though God might sometimes feel far away rather than near us, Christ the living Word speaks to our situations today as well. Christ meets us in our storms and is there, ready, even before we call out for help. The living Word of the Holy Spirit, is near – on our lips and on our hearts – with us always and ready to save us before we even know we need it. Christ, the Word made flesh, comes to us, gets in the boat with us and gives us courage to call on the Lord for our salvation. Sometimes, like the disciples, we do not recognize Christ coming toward us or in our midst. Sometimes we do not hear or feel the Word near us. That is when a leap of faith is required. Such a leap means jumping out of the boats we have constructed that suggest that perfect faith, good standing in the community or fame and fortune will protect us from harm. It requires jumping out of the boat that suggests that anything other than the love of God is required for our salvation.

That love is like Jeanie’s love for Tony in the 1960s sitcom *I Dream of Jeanie*. Jeanie (J-e-a-n-i-e) is a genie (g-e-n-i-e) who is in love with a man named Tony. Jeanie loves Tony so much that she cannot stay in her bottle. She keeps popping out at inconvenient times wanting to help, wanting to be with Tony, wanting to share a life with him. God’s love is

like this genie named Jeanie. It is not bottled up, ready to spring out when called on and kept safely out of sight when we have things under control all on our own. God's love does not wait to be summoned. It keeps popping into our lives even when it might be inconvenient. Like Jeanie with her Tony, God cannot resist the urge to be with us. God is not sitting around waiting for us to acknowledge him in order to save us. Rather, God is actively involved in our lives even before we recognize the need for mercy and grace.

When we call on the Lord to save us, we do so not because we have perfected ourselves to the point of worthiness before God. Instead, when we call on the Lord to save us, we do so because we, like Peter, are sinking.

Calling on the name of the Lord is important because it is the point at which you acknowledge your humanity. It is the point at which you recognize that you, yourself, cannot do the stuff of salvation. Calling on the name of the Lord is an admission that you need help and that help is there, at the ready, even before you call for it and even before you know you need it. Even if you think you do not deserve it; God's hand is there in your pain and peril, in your terror and uncertainty and in your joy and blessing.

Amen.