

Rev. Tasha L. Blackburn

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Hold On Tight

Matthew 14: 22-33

A blind trust walk into the woods is not my idea of a fun way to spend a Wednesday afternoon. Even so, that is exactly what happened this past week in southern Illinois while on the junior high camping trip. Our leader, Mitch, walked us through the woods, hand in hand, promising us we would not walk into a tree or trip over a rock. With blindfolds in place he explained he had led us to a rope maze. He separated us and placed us onto different parts of the maze. Then he said, "Follow the rope and try to find the way through the maze." And so we began. Hand over hand, blind step after step, I felt my way out. Or so I thought. Minutes passed. Mitch began calling to us, "If you need help, say, 'Mitch, I need help!'" Around trees and over rocks I continued. Surely the way through was just one more step further. Finally I called out, "Mitch, I need help!" He arrived immediately. "Do you need help?" he asked. "Actually, I just have a few questions," I said. "Do you have a question or do you need help?" he responded. "It would be *helpful* if you would answer my question," I snapped. So, he left me there, holding tight to my rope. More time passed. "Nine people have made it out of the maze," Mitch eventually called out. I became more determined than ever. If they could do it then so could I! I kept wondering, "Where was that blasted way out? How could I have missed it?" And still, there was Mitch, crying out, "If you need help just say, 'Mitch I need help.'"

Step after step, reach after reach I made my way further along the rope to find no way through. Finally I stopped moving. I couldn't take another step. This was impossible and I was terribly lost in this maze. "Mitch!," I yelled. "I need help!" Right away he appeared beside me. "Do you need help?" he asked. Long pause... "Yes," I admitted. "I need help." He led me away from the rope. When I tried to hold on to it he said, "It is alright. I am showing you the way through this maze." Once I let go of the rope he took my blindfold off and he said, "Look around." Looking around me for the first time, I saw that the maze was just a huge circle. It had indentations and detours in it but, really, it was just a continuous circle. There was no way out. "I was there calling to you," Mitch said. "Why didn't you take me up on my offer? I told you I could help. There is no way through this," he continued, "unless you admit you need help."

What a rotten trick. Here I was, running around in circles and ignoring the help right by my side. It seemed a lot like life, you know? We get hunkered down in our day to day struggles and we assume we have to go through everything by ourselves. I could understand why he had us do it. We can think the only way through something is to just keep pushing, or just keep doing what we've always done. As I tossed my blindfold in the pile with the others I only had one problem with the exercise. "This is great," I thought, "except there is only one problem. How often in life do you really have someone saying, 'If you need help, I'm right here and I can help'?" Life is actually so much harder than this because that help is not right there, calling out to you." Then the truth hit me right between the eyes and the truth was a voice saying, "And here, all this time, I thought you knew me."

Here in Matthew's gospel Jesus' voice is asking the same thing. The disciples have been put into a boat, Jesus put them there, and they have been sent off onto the sea during a terrible storm. Wave after wave crashes over them and, with each one, they hold tight to the boat, certain the storm is

going to win. Then, to their shock, they look out and see Jesus standing on the water. The waves do not affect him and he tells them, “Don’t be afraid. Here I am.” Peter ramps up the tension by getting out of the boat. Now he is not just thrown about in the boat but he is out in the middle of the chaos. That is what the sea is, of course. It is chaos and struggle. It is destruction. Along with the demons and disease and death that Jesus faced down in his ministry, the sea is the final uncontrollable chaos of their world. They have been tossed about in this destruction and now Peter is in the heart of it. He has heard Jesus’ voice and he wants to follow but the power of the storm scares him. And so he sinks into its chaos and Jesus has to catch him. As he catches him, Jesus looks into Peter’s eyes and says, “And here, all this time, I thought you knew me.” Actually, in our translation he says, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” but the meaning is similar.

When he began, Peter was intent on listening to Jesus; intent on following him, even onto the chaos of the sea. But once the wind grew strong and the struggle increased, Peter had to choose which he believed was more powerful: the storm or Jesus and he fears it is the storm. He lets the struggle win, ignoring the voice that is saying, “Don’t be afraid. I am right here. I can help.” Only after he cries out, “Lord save me! Lord, help!” can he rise out of the chaos that has its grip on him. As Jesus lifts up this man who is drenched in his ordeal, he says, “I thought you knew me. I thought you knew that there is no struggle that I cannot help you through. I thought you knew that even the chaos and power of the sea, even the turmoil and trouble of your everyday, cannot match my strength. You of little faith, I thought you knew me.”

That day in the maze there were only four of us left blindfolded by the time I asked for help. Three of the four who held out were the adults of the group. It gives new insight into Jesus saying we will not get into the kingdom of heaven unless we become like a child. We adults went into it knowing more than those kids. We knew how mazes work. We knew we were smart and strong (enough) and that we had a good work ethic. We knew we’d gotten ourselves out of jams before. We knew more than they did. And, in the end, we did not know the most important thing. Instead of holding tight to the rope, I should have asked for help and held tight to the hands of my leader. Asking for help was not a failure it was the only way through.

In each of our lives there is some tough sailing, some very rocky water. It cannot help but be this way. The disciples had no choice about whether or not they would face the storm. They only had a choice about how they would face it. They faced it by holding tight to the boat, bracing themselves for each wave. More often than not we do the same thing. Because we know too much: we know our problems and we think we know how to get through them; we know ourselves and how strong we can be; we know we’re the only ones who can understand what storm we’re going through. We know too much and yet we know nothing at all because forget that Jesus is standing on the storm. He is watching us struggle and falter and brace ourselves as we head nowhere fast. And he keeps crying out, “Do not be afraid for I am here. I can help.” He is waiting for us to loosen our grip on the boat and cry out to him as we finally admit, “Jesus, I need help!” Amen.