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**Sunday 9 August to Sunday 16 August**

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Sunday 9 August 2020

# In the midst of chaos

by Rachael Stelzer

**'Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid' (Matthew 14:27).**

Read Matthew 14:22–33

The disciples are exhausted, and they’re scared. They have been rowing for hours, and they’re getting nowhere. The waves are threatening their boat.

And they’re on the sea. The place of chaos. The place of evil and dark spirits and fear. Jesus made them get into this boat. Where is he?

Maybe they don’t recognise their master because the Jesus who sent them onto the sea was weary, haggard and running on empty. The One who walks to them on the water is serene, balanced, and empowered. His prayer time up the mountain has re-energised and encouraged him. Or perhaps, despite his recent feeding of over 5000, the disciples still don’t believe that their teacher can walk on water.

Over their cries, Jesus calls to them, 'Take heart, it is I; have no fear'. Matthew’s Jewish readers would instantly hear echoes of God’s words to Moses. Jesus’ words could be translated, 'Take heart, I AM; don’t be afraid'.

I AM.

In Matthew’s Gospel, this story is meant to reveal who Jesus is. But that revelation is only possible in the midst of the chaos. If the disciples had not embarked on this frightening journey onto the Sea of Galilee, they would have missed the opportunity to see God revealed in their midst.

All around us, we can see chaos. We must confront the dangerous and deadly forces all around us. But in the midst of our fear, a voice speaks. 'Take heart, I AM; don’t be afraid.'

***Lord Jesus, wave walker: You come to us in our panic and our stress. Remind us that you are God, and you are for us. Take away our fear and help us to trust in you. Amen.***

Monday 10 August 2020

# Your God reigns

by Rachael Stelzer

**How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’ (Isaiah 52:7).**

Read Isaiah 52:7–10

For hours, days, and maybe weeks, they’ve been waiting. Straining their ears and craning their necks, they are desperate for news of the battle. Have we won, or have we been defeated again? The watchmen have been standing on the ruins of the city, looking in vain for the fleet-footed messenger.

And now those running feet, those beautiful feet, finish their journey up Mount Zion, to bring the weary exiles the news that ‘your God reigns’!

The messenger proclaims good news, peace, glad tidings, and salvation. In response, the people of God – ‘the ruins’ – burst into songs of praise. At the end of this passage, we hear the joy and relief streaming from God’s people at the comfort, the redemption, and the active work of God, as he ‘rolls his sleeves up’ to save them. This passage is sometimes used at Christmas to remind us that God has rolled his sleeves up and worked out our salvation.

Are you straining for news? Are you waiting to hear if the battle has been won?

I live in South-East Queensland, where many people are waiting for news of a battle in our area. Our brothers and sisters in Victoria, and Sydney, are waiting for news too.

It’s time to hear those beautiful words: your God reigns!

God reigns – not just over one nation but over the universe.

Let’s continue to be the sentinels who listen and look for God’s work in the world. Let’s be the messengers who comfort and encourage others with the hope and the faith we have in God’s salvation. And for those of us who are feeling like ruins, may we find a song of praise in the rubble, for God has rolled up his sleeves, and the risen Jesus is with us.

**Sovereign God, we remember and acknowledge that you reign over the whole world. Hold us close as we wait for some good news. Remind us that your love and your salvation are the greatest treasures we could ever hope for. Comfort those who feel ruined at the moment. And help us to love in your name. Amen.**

Tuesday 11 August 2020

# Down, down

by Rachael Stelzer

**In my distress I called to the Lord,
and he answered me (Jonah 2:2).**

Read Jonah 2:1–10

I have never before focused on the words of Jonah, sitting in the belly of a large fish, waiting on the Lord to rescue him. I have not noticed their beauty, the strength of Jonah’s relationship with the Lord, or his growth in grace.

Jonah has been asked to take God’s message of repentance and forgiveness to the Ninevites, who are known for their vicious persecution of the Hebrews. He has refused and has gone in the opposite direction.

Now Jonah has seen God intervene. Caught in a supernatural storm, Jonah has claimed responsibility for the tempest and abandoned himself to the waves. And God has sent a huge fish to swallow Jonah. How undignified. How miraculous.

What follows is one of the most beautiful passages of biblical poetry outside the Psalms.

Interestingly, Jonah focuses not on the international incident he is about to become part of, but on his intimate relationship with almighty God. Jonah recognises the desperate nature of his current situation but also trusts in God to save him. He doesn’t know how or when, but he trusts that his deliverance will happen.

Jonah’s movements until now have been leading him down: down to Joppa, down into the boat, and down, down into the sea. (I love the picture of the seaweed combover that he describes.) So, having reached rock bottom, surrounded by digestive juices and fish food, Jonah repents.

Repentance is an ongoing and daily process. We repent, not so that God will accept us, but because he already has, and we want to be in that relationship with him where our will aligns with his. Jonah speaks repeatedly of 'going down', both into the belly of the fish and into the world of the dead, and God lifting him out of both situations.

Many of us sit in isolation right now, either enforced physical isolation or in loneliness. What is the most important thing for us? Big world events, or our relationship with almighty God? We don’t know when we will be rescued or how we will be rescued, but we do know that 'salvation comes from the Lord' (verse 10).

May we sing a song of hope in God’s salvation, a tune of daily repentance, and a shout of praise to the One who lifts us out of the pit.

**God of the seas, sky, and land, you showed Jonah that nothing is more important than a relationship with you. Hold your isolated people close. Show us the gift of your presence, and help us to sing of your salvation to a world in need of hope. In our Saviour’s name, we pray. Amen.**

Wednesday 12 August 2020

# Echoes

by Rachael Stelzer

**'Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world' (John 6:14).**

Read John 6:14–24

In looking at John’s account of Jesus walking on water, I was tempted to compare it to Matthew’s account (see Sunday’s devotion). But, as usual, John packs an extra layer into his text.

First, Jesus feeds more than 5000 at Passover time, which reminds the Israelites of Moses’ provision of manna and quail for the people. The people respond, 'Surely this was the prophet that is to come …' So they claim that Jesus is equal to the great prophet and leader, Moses.

Like Moses, Jesus goes up a mountain to speak to God by himself.

Then he goes out onto the sea when his disciples are miles out. This isn’t an equivalent act to Moses’ parting of the Red Sea – there is no staff-waving here. This act defies every law of nature. And this man affects the wind and waves without words. Who is this guy? As in Matthew’s Gospel, and as in the story of Moses, we hear again the echo, 'It is I' or 'I AM'.

Then, when the people around the sea realise that Jesus has left the place where he fed them, the 'exodus' begins. Some are in boats, and some are on foot, but all are hungry for more of this great prophet. Yet for them, Jesus represents a political or military revolution, not a visible manifestation of God. He has something far greater in mind, something that will reveal his greatest glory – our redemption.

How often do we look for a Jesus who will serve our purposes, rather than choosing to align ourselves to his will? The One who walks on water, who feeds our souls, who stills wind and waves, who desires our trust and allegiance, who has gone the way of the cross to bring us home – let’s joyfully recognise that Jesus!

***Lord Jesus, you are worthy of all honour and glory. Send your Spirit to grow our faith and trust in you. Feed our souls. Heal us in body and heart. Open our eyes to see your divine love. Help us to follow in your way, to the glory of your name. Amen.***

Thursday 13 August 2020

# Fishermen

by Rachael Stelzer

**He called out to them, 'Friends, haven’t you any fish?'**

**'No', they answered (John 21:5).**

Read John 21:1–13

My family contains several fishermen. Those who, when a bystander asks how they’re biting, give a coy and downplayed version so as not to give away the good spots. Those who will hold the fish up close to the camera, so it looks 'this big' on social media. And those who have their tried-and-tested theories about which bait works with which rig. The longer they’ve fished, the more expert they are.

Yesterday we looked at John’s account of Jesus feeding 5000 people, an event that rang bells deep in the collective memory of the Jewish people. Jesus was recognised as 'the prophet who is to come', and fed the people in a way that reminded them of the manna and quail in the wilderness.

For the disciples, so much has happened since then. Ministry, healing, power, confusion, horror, sorrow, disillusionment, rumours, hope. But when the chips were down, they had bolted, betrayed, denied and run. They consider themselves pretty lousy disciples. But they are still fishermen.

So Peter says, 'I’m going fishing'. I’m going back to who I was. I’m waking up from this dream and getting on with the way things were.

And they catch nothing. Now they’re not even good fishermen.

And then the 'expert' on the shore says with a twinkle in his eye, 'How are they biting? Maybe try the other side of the boat …'.

Ugh. Sure, old mate. Whatever. I guess we have nothing to lose. Maybe we’ll even prove you wrong. Clearly, there are just no …  Andrew! James! John! Help me!

And then, like a series of flashbacks, young John connects the dots. We’ve heard this fishing advice before when we were called from these boats … he’s breaking bread and handing out fish … Fishers of people … Fish …

'It is the Lord!'

And, as on the night before his death, Jesus sits down with those who denied him and those who ran away, and he shares a meal with them. Like the day he fed the 5000, he invites them to provide some of the meal. And, as on the day they were called, they leave the boats for good, to follow their risen Saviour. They get it – without Jesus, they are nothing. With him, they are fishers of men. Their relationship with Jesus is not based on how good they are – it is all about how good he is.

***Lord Jesus, help me to recognise you calling from the shore. Help me overcome my need to have it all together. Remind me that you are the One who welcomes me into a relationship, not because I am good, but because you are Love. Amen.***

Friday 14 August 2020

# Chosen

by Rachael Stelzer

**Has God rejected his people? By no means! (Romans 11:1).**

Read Romans 10:16–11:1

Paul uses several verses from Scripture to remind his readers that not all Jews have followed Jesus.

Perhaps they haven’t been told about him. Nope, that’s not what the psalmist said.

Or maybe they don’t understand. Hmm, Moses said God would make Israel jealous using people they think can’t understand anything. Ouch!

Now he really puts the cat among the pigeons and reminds the Jews what Isaiah said: that God would seek out people who hadn’t even sought him out, the way the Jews did, and that when he reached out to the Jews, they would be nothing but mule-headed.

It's looking worse and worse for the chosen people, and then Paul gets to the ultimate point: Has God rejected Israel? – after all of his promises to make them his holy nation, and to bring his salvation from them?

By no means! (Romans 11:1)

'Just look here!' says Paul. 'I’m living proof! I’m a Jew from the tribe of Benjamin, and I am witness to the promise. I am one of those hard-hearted, stiff-necked people, and God sought me out. Despite my arrogance, my pride and my well-known persecution of Christ-followers, still, God ran after me.'

And I can stand with Paul in our time of fear and doubt, at a time when people ask, 'Where is God? Has he rejected us?'

By no means! I’m living proof that God loves us, cares deeply for each of us, and has a plan for all of us.

How about you? Are you sitting on your laurels, or hanging on by a thread? Either way, can you claim, with Paul and me, 'I’m living proof of the love of God in a person’s life'? You have a story to tell. A story of forgiveness and of God coming after you. It’s a story the world needs to hear. Let’s share our stories. Let’s testify to the love of Jesus. And let’s share that love with a world that desperately needs it.

***Lord Jesus, your plan for our salvation began with one nation. And through this nation, you have called, blessed and redeemed all the peoples of the earth. Help us to witness our joy in you and your salvation. And help us to shine your love into the lives of others. Amen.***

Saturday 15 August 2020

# Global praise

by Rachael Stelzer

**May the peoples praise you, God ...
May all the peoples praise you (Psalm 67:3,5).**

Read Psalm 67

Let’s finish this week with a beautiful psalm of corporate praise. With its repeated refrain, this was a psalm for all the people to sing with a cantor or song leader. But it’s so much more than that.

It begins with a tweaking of the Aaronic blessing, that early blessing of the Jewish people.

May God be gracious to us and bless usand make his face shine on us …

But we instantly learn that this blessing is not just for the people of Israel.

…so that your ways may be known on earth,your salvation among all nations.

This is bigger than just one chosen people – this is universal. God’s blessing is for everyone.

May the nations be glad and sing for joy,for you rule the peoples with equityand guide the nations of the earth.

And while the psalm has begun by asking for God’s blessing, it continues by acknowledging that God has already blessed us. It sings with gratitude.

The land yields its harvest;God, our God, blesses us.

And the ultimate reason for God’s blessing over us? Recognition by the whole world that God is God.

May God bless us still,so that all the ends of the earth will fear him.

As the people of God, it’s easy to look around our world and hear the voices of fear and doom around us. We watch world leaders and local leaders swap blame and whole groups of people clashing against each other. One could be forgiven for thinking that we are not being blessed right now.

But it is in choosing to look for ways we are being blessed, examples of where God is at work and where people are being loved, that we lift our praise to God, and the ends of the earth learn to fear him. And as we praise God, we realise that all over the world, people we have never met are also lifting up his name.

Please do yourself a favour this weekend. Sit with this psalm. Take a deep breath. Read it slowly to yourself. It will only take a minute. And give yourself some space to think about how God has blessed you.

***Heavenly Father, as we lift our praise to you, whether it is easy for us or a desperate act of faith, you are changing us into the likeness of your Son. Let all the peoples see and learn to fear you. Let your people all over the world love in your name and thank you for your blessings, so that your ways may be known on earth. Praise be to you! Amen.***

Sunday 16 August 2020

# What comes out

by Pastor Reid Matthias

**The things that come out of a person’s mouth come from the heart and these defile them (Matthew 15:11).**

Read Matthew 15:1–2,10–20

Isn’t it interesting, that when I read Jesus’ words, I think to myself, ‘Yeah, but what about the coronavirus?’

Jesus was responding to the Pharisees and the Scribes who seemed intent on making sure that the outward parts of bodies are clean, but Jesus could quite literally see to the ‘heart’ of their argument. It is one thing to be clean on the outside, but it is a more difficult thing to be clean on the inside.

Years ago, my brother Ryan worked for the Juvenile Corrections Department. His job was to help troubled youth along their path and, during the week, they would have meetings to talk about feelings and issues. During one of these sessions, my brother was appalled at the abusive and foul language the young men used. So he instituted a rule that whenever any of them swore, they would have to spit into a styrofoam cup.

The boys took this as a challenge thinking that my brother was naïve, so they’d rear back and put a real beauty into the cup.

At the end of the session, Ryan spoke with reference to this verse: ‘What comes out of your mouth is a reflection of what is in your heart’.

‘Now’, he said to the boys, ‘all of you have to drink what you’ve put in the cup’.

Imagine if all of us had to drink our words!

But the opposite is also true. If our words and thoughts, the matters of the heart, are a reflection of Paul’s words in Philippians 4:8, ‘… if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things!’, then we understand the heart is clean.

God bless your hearts and the things you say.

***Heavenly Father, thank you for the beautiful things of the heart, for pure love for you and others. Guide my thoughts and words as I live so that others may hear good words and glorify Jesus. Amen.***