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Relentless
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Sermon Notes:

Matthew 14 starts out with an unfolding macabre scene at Herod's birthday party. We are told that John the Baptist has been imprisoned for calling out the sinfulness of Herod's incestuous marriage to Herodias, his niece – who was the wife of his half-brother, Herod Philip II. Herod, enamored of her, seduced her, divorced his wife, and married Herodias.

John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin, did not hold back in criticizing Herod's actions and the Jewish laws that were violated. For his truth-telling – John was imprisoned by Herod

John's in prison, and Herodias' daughter Salome is dancing for Herod at his party. Herod was so pleased that in front of the large gathering, he offers Salome anything she would like. Her mother, still smarting from John's criticism of her and her marriage to Herod, calls the daughter aside and tells her to ask for the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

And so she did, and Herod, knowing John was an innocent man – but not wanting to lose face in front of the crowd – trades a life for his public opinion – and has John beheaded and the prophet's head brought to Salome on a platter.

One has to have some sympathy for Salome – to have such grisly, selfish, and self-centered parents.

Word of John's death traveled quickly.

When Jesus heard of John's murder he left the area he was in for the desert and mountains of Bethsaida, away from and out of the territory of Herod. Often it is referred to as Jesus going into the desert, but think more *deserted* than *sandy*. Frequently the word *desert* is used to describe a place that is uninhabited, away from the crowds.

And to such a place Jesus headed, to mourn for John, to pray, to wonder about what was going on in this crazy place he found himself where things just keep getting worse – would he be next – what was he to do next...

As more and more people heard about John's murder, they too headed to where they had heard Jesus had gone. We know the following prelude to this morning's reading well, from our weekly offering response.

Jesus seeing the crowd gathering and has compassion on them.

If you would, just think about that for a moment. Jesus looks out over the thousands, we are told, their murmuring, shared sorrow, seeking for better,,hoping, downtrodden, oppressed...and he has compassion. I wonder if he, too, sometimes just wanted to snap his fingers to make things better.

Here they were, on top of everything else, confused and frightened by the death of John the Baptist, more and more concerned by the erratic behavior of Herod, and a group that more and more was looking to Jesus as they had to every other Messiah – to overturn to the oppressors, to have a new and just King!

They had to wonder and hope, as well – would this terrible act of violence toward his cousin be the tipping point? Would his senseless murder catapult Jesus into calling them to arms and taking over, finally – out from under the oppressors and persecution?

Instead, Jesus fed them.

How much that says.

How much that says. He came from prayer, had compassion on them, and fed them.

And when they were done, he told his disciples to get in their boat and cross the Sea of Galilee to the other side – to the Northwestern side of the sea to Bethsaida-Julius.

What made Jesus send them away telling them he would join them later? Some say that he knew the disciples, too, would like to see him as king – and with them there in the crowds – they might do more to stir everyone up in trying to convince Jesus to do just that!

With the disciples gone, Jesus signaled it was time for them all to go home. He dismissed them, wished them well, and returned to the mountain to pray. He must have been exhausted.

Sometimes, it is easy to think that Jesus had no emotions – or because of who he was – he was somehow above all the tumult and the ups and downs of ministry.

I've always known the opposite. I have always seen him as a living breathing emotional being that knew every feeling each of us has known, will ever know – and in spite of the roller coaster – he managed to hold it together, with a few outbursts here and there – which I am very grateful for.

[Story about turning over the tables – related to sorrow at John's murder. Even foreshadowing of his own.]

Take this day for example. John is murdered. That's more than enough to bear, but then in the midst of that storm – he ministers to others; others who want to raise him to king and to fix all that was wrong for them, for Judaism –

It must have been a temptation. He must have been tempted by the anger that produces, “Enough!” It’s time for Herod to go. It would be easy to see how the death of John and all the oppression of the government of the time and the corruption of its leaders could have justified his reaction.

And you know what, I think he could have pulled it off. But what does he do?

He feeds them and prays.

Prays a prayer, maybe something like the one we use so often --- “Thy will be mine.”

Storms all around.

There are different stories in the bible about Jesus in the midst of storms – political storms and physical storms, such as the one that takes place later midway across the Sea of Galilee.

This particular storm appears in both Matthew and Mark, with some major differences. Mark’s gospel, the first Gospel, has Jesus walking by the boat tossed in the storm. When the disciples see him, at first they think him a ghost – that is that he has been killed, too, and his spirit was beside them. When they call out to him, Jesus walks to the boat and steps in it – and the waves are immediately calmed.

This is Mark’s version, no mention of Peter. Now, it is also believed that Matthew drew upon Mark, Q, and well as M – some of his own material.

Matthew, writing for a different audience, a sect bent on reforming Judaism to its stricter codes, he finds himself between the ancient and emerging, intent on a high Christology, that is of Jesus as Savior, and elevating Jesus above the movement to ancient codes – Jesus as Messiah – not the next rising political superstar to fix all the wrongs of the current political structure. Peter is the vehicle for that – it is Jesus who will save others based on faith – not on warring.

And from there we come to here. The question that is always part of this is: “Did Jesus really walk on water?” An answer as good as any other is, “Seems plausible for Jesus.”

But what about us. What water are we called to walk upon? What were other reasons that Matthew added Peter’s experience to that story day in the Sea of Galilee?

You will think about that on your own. Read the verses again, take home the bulleting, open up the bible and read over Chapter 14 in its entirety, search “Matthew 14 Commentators” on your computer and you will discover rich discussion to provoke your own.

And as you consider the story and the narrative, think about the water we, you and I are asked to step out upon in the midst of the storms of our lives.

How do we manage through the toughest of times to just put one foot forward in front of the other, to walk on in the face of huge and frightening, disruptive and saddening events.

Maybe one of the thoughts you will come to is that it was not just Peter reaching out for Jesus in the midst of the storm, wanting so to believe, to be faithful, to prove his faithfulness by “walking on water” – a in the midst of a risk, in the midst of succeeding until he started thinking...

Nor was it just at that moment Peter asking for help and the immediate hand of Jesus that was there for the asking...

Maybe you will think about the possibility that it was Jesus walking on the water to them, to those he loved, out of the terrible sadness he must have felt over the loss of his cousin, seeking some respite from the exhausting effort of compassion for the masses that had gathered around him, some relief from the pressures on him – by being with those who were his disciples...

Jesus did it too, you know, he steps out on *his* faith, stays on *his* path whether solid ground or not, bringing *his* witness to all of what it is *his* Father/Mother has sent him to do. *He* does what he calls *us* to do.

Jesus is relentless. His is the assurance to not lose heart or hope, no matter what. His is the assurance that no matter what happens on this physical plane – that each of us is connected to more, to God – and that all of this is but a journey home, follow...

No matter what the storm, no matter whether we falter after our first few steps or not, the hand of Jesus, or however you know God and Spirit – that hand – that help – is always there. And the answer is not in war, or vengeance – but in heart: compassion, love, courage – and the risk to which such things call us.

To do what Jesus did, the best we can...

A little later on in Matthew, Matthew 22: 36-40

We have the following verses:

36 “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

37 Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’^[a] 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’^[b] 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Yes, even if it means walking on water.