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**“Angels Rush In”  
A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth  
14<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
July 3, 2011**

**Genesis 24:34–38, 42–49; Romans 7:15–25a; Matthew 14:22–33**

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First, I want to tell two stories.

Story one takes place in Decatur, Georgia, on the eve of our very first day as students at Columbia Theological Seminary in August 1992.

It is supper time, and our family has been invited to the refectory for our first freshman class get-together.

(We tell our children that “refectory” is the seminary word for “cafeteria” and that they will have to get used to people using a lot of different words around here.)

Columbia's refectory resembles a scene from *Harry Potter* with its high-vaulted ceiling, stained-glass windows, and looming portraits of mostly male professors looking down

from the periphery of the wood-paneled room.

It's a pretty imposing structure, not exactly light-filled and friendly.

And on this occasion, it is heavily filled with new faces:

seminary students and their families coming together for the first time.

Our children at that time are 9, 7, and 3. Their parents are considerably older.

Two parents are always outnumbered by three children, you know,

but we manage to make it through the food line with plastic dishes

piled high with their favorite starchy foods with cartons of chocolate milk

and little bowls of jello on the side:

comfort foods to offset an initially uncomfortable situation.

We're doing pretty well making our way towards a table when our son, Andrew, glances up at the foreboding portraits floating above our heads.

And as he glances up, his tray slants down, and all the dishes take a slide and hit the floor with a resounding crash, making that classic wakka, wakka, wakka sound of a round plate spinning faster and faster until it draws to a dramatic climax of silence.

And a hush comes over the room, and a well of tears fills Andrew's eyes.

But immediately, **immediately**, a young student named Michael Chaney pushes back his chair, rushes over to Andrew, kneels down to his eye level, and says,

"Don't worry. I do that all the time myself."

And he helps clean up the spilled food, takes Andrew back through the line to replace what he has lost, and returns with him to our table.

It is the first of many encounters for us with Michael Chaney,

who turns out to be a pretty ordinary sort of guy and a good friend.

But on that day, he is Jesus to us.

Story two is one you perhaps read about in the newspaper or heard on the radio.

In the spring of 2010, doctors at Emory University in Atlanta discover that a freshman baseball standout from Wake Forest University is suffering from ANCA vasculitis, a nasty autoimmune disease that cripples the kidney's ability to function.

That freshman, Kevin Jordan, from Columbus, GA,

has already dropped 40 pounds in his first year of college and is struggling to stay in school and to retain his treasured athletic scholarship,

even while tethered, 11 hours a day, to a dialysis machine.

The antidote, Emory doctors convey, is a kidney transplant

which will require wait time, minimally of three years, until a matching donor can be found.

And statistically, 15 people die a day in the US waiting for a kidney transplant.  
Kevin's baseball coach at Wake Forest, Tom Walter, learns the diagnosis of his  
star center fielder in August 2010, and he can't stomach the debilitating options.

So, immediately, **immediately**, without flinching, he tells the Jordan family,

"I want to be tested because I think I might be a match."

At this point, Coach Walter doesn't even know if he will qualify as a potential match or not;

Walter doesn't even know the risk involved in being a donor,

nor does he seem to care.

He just can't stomach the alternative: endlessly waiting, not knowing, not joining

the Jordan family in their time of distress, not acting to alleviate their pain.

Kevin Jordan, by the way, is a 19-year-old African-American male;

Coach Walter is a 42-year-old Caucasian male.

As background, it happens that Coach Walter himself is from Johnstown, PA,

which succumbs to unsettling flooding about every 50 years.

Furthermore, Walter's most recent coaching position prior to coming to Wake Forest

was at the University of New Orleans, on Lake Pontchartrain,

where he was working when Hurricane Katrina swamped the city in 2005.

So, living with uncertainty, responding to crisis is nothing novel to Coach Walter.

But this situation is new and different, although similar in that it involves risk.

Nevertheless, in February 2011, two surgeries take place at Emory University Hospital:

Coach Walter donates a kidney,

and Kevin Jordan receives a new kidney,

and the results have been extraordinary for both.

(Steve Duin, "The Gift." *Wake Forest University Magazine*. Volume 58, Number 3; p. 33–37)

What do these two stories have in common with our Gospel text?

Why do they pop to mind when I read about the disciples in that boat,

a considerable distance from shore,

doing their best to hold their course against a stiff wind

that has sprung up to buffet them, toss their skiff around

at night, when they have no visual clues for orientation?

The Greek says that their ship is “distressed” by the waves.

It never mentions a storm— just waves driven hard against the ship  
by a contrary wind.

Does this mean that their ship is taking on water,

that they are on the verge of breaking up and going down?

And who is more distressed really? The ship or the disciples in the ship?

And who is on the verge of breaking up and going down? The ship or its passengers?

The key word here is “distressed,” no matter how you look at it,

and the phenomena that the disciples experience in their distress  
during that fourth watch of the night from 3–6 a.m.

Jesus from his mountaintop perch where he has been alone in prayer,

mourning the recent death of his Holy Spirit soul mate and mentor, John the Baptist:

the one who jumped in the watery womb at their prenatal meeting,

the one who baptized him at another watery site as the Holy Spirit descended.

Distressed himself, Jesus senses his disciples' distress from afar, sight unseen, as someone

only fully God might do,

and he comes down to them, walking on the sea, to join them in their distress.

Immediately, **immediately**, he reveals his divine God-self to them, saying,

“Cheer up. I am. Fear not.”

This disclosure hearkens back to another disclosure, the one to Moses at the burning bush,

where the Lord says, “**I am** the God of your father, the God of Abraham,

the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.

I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt.

I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers,

and **I am** concerned about their suffering.

So I have come down to rescue them.” (Exodus 3:6–8)

And so Jesus comes down, as God is want to come down,

to join, to comfort, to save his people from their misery.

Distressed himself in his grief over losing John the Baptist,

Jesus empathizes with his disciples in their emotional distress, as someone only  
fully human might do,  
and he comes down to them, walking on the sea,  
stepping into the turbulence of their emotional storm,  
into their sense of things being out of their control,  
into their fear of being overwhelmed by chaos,  
into their tasting of death in the watery brine.

He comes down to them, walking on the sea, to join, to comfort, and to save.

And when they cry out in distress, immediately, **immediately**, Jesus speaks words of  
comfort that belie his two-fold identity:

“Cheer up. I am. Fear not.”

God-with-us has heard the cries of his people and has responded to their need,  
immediately, to quell their fear and bring them a sense of inner peace and hope.

Responding to need, empathy, compassion and immediacy  
are important elements of all of these stories.

Do you see the connections now?

I wish I responded immediately to people in need like that, don't you?

I wish I didn't overthink a crisis, trying to decide if I should jump in or not.

I wish I didn't worry about saying the wrong thing or not saying anything at all  
about seeming overly-intrusive to people's private lives.

I wish I were the type who jumps up when cafeteria trays crash down,  
who signs a donor registry when my health could benefit someone's unhealth,  
the type who leans into a crisis and not away from it.

Jesus is succinct in his speech to his friends, you notice. He doesn't gush verbiage.

He assures them that he is present, that God is present  
in their current crisis.

His grace-filled presence is sufficient for their need.

Nothing more.

Nor does he command the wind to abate or the waters to rest.

In his presence, they just do.

Is this a miracle story?

Is it a story about a man with supernatural powers that enable him to walk on water  
and to empower others to do the same?

We become easily distracted by the water-walking phenomena, I think—  
easily awed by Jesus' superhuman abilities to subvert the laws of nature.

There's an insect, you know, colloquially tagged as the Jesus Bug or pond skater,  
more commonly known to us as the water strider (*Gerris remigis*),  
a six-legged species that has the ability to float and glide and walk  
across ponds, streams, and lakes without ever breaking the surface  
tension of the water.

Its uncanny buoyancy is due to the nature of its legs and feet  
which are covered with thousands of microscopic hairs  
capable of trapping tiny air bubbles underneath,  
allowing the water strider to stay afloat, even under turbulent or stormy conditions.

So, scientifically, it is not an impossibility.

Nor is it theologically, if we attribute the creation of all nature and all the laws of nature  
to God, who normally works according to certain rules  
but certainly is not bound by them.

Or perhaps this story is the stuff of later legend that developed around this extraordinary  
man, Jesus, after his death. This, also, is certainly a possibility.

I prefer to categorize this as a story of "signs and wonders" about this God/man, Jesus.  
As such, it is revelatory and prescient regarding the rising tide of God's reign,  
rocking the world's boat through the personhood of Jesus Christ.

It is revelatory in that it shows that God is at work outside of our limited knowledge  
of the laws of nature—with which we tend to tie God's hands.

And it also shows that God is at work outside of our Temple cultures  
and church rituals—with which we also tend to tie God's hands.

Jesus shows his slip, so to speak, when he flies from that mountaintop perch,  
his feet barely touching either land or water as he rushes **immediately**

to the side of his friends in distress,  
never hesitating to weigh the risk or possible cost of his actions,  
just going to them, straight-away, to be with them, fully present.  
Jesus' divine slip is showing, reminding me of Miss Clavel, the caretaking nun  
in the children's book, *Madeline*, who normally appears so composed  
and so neatly encased in her black head-to-toe wimple and habit.  
But as the story goes, "in the middle of the night, Miss Clavel turns on the light and says,  
'Something is not right!' And afraid of disaster, Miss Clavel runs  
fast and faster, and she says, 'Please children do—  
tell me what is troubling you?'

(Ludwig Bemelmans. *Madeline*. 1939. Viking Press)

And as Miss Clavel propels herself in the direction of the twelve little girls  
under her care in the middle of the night,  
her feet are nowhere to be seen as she appears to hover above  
the carpet and fly down the hall,  
her white nightgown peaking out beneath her black habit,  
which she has hastily donned.

That's how I imagine Jesus in this scenario as he rushes in to be with his friends  
at their time of need: compassionately selfless, quick to act,  
leaning towards the boat, as if he were the one who might capsize, not them.  
Jesus' compassionate act is a sign that "I am," God of the Ages, is with us,  
a very present help, **immediately**, in times of trouble.

As biblical scholar William Placher says, "One of the things the Gospels  
want us to understand about Jesus is that he is the one who will  
always provide all that people need—  
and who has particular concern for those who are most needy."

(William C. Placher. *Jesus the Savior*, p. 90)

Jesus' compassionate act is a sign for the church, too, as Christ's body,  
that our calling also is to act as "first responders" to those in need,  
and not to hesitate, or overthink, or to form a committee of task force  
when what is really needed at the moment is our compassionate presence:

just being there, with someone, God for someone, through us.  
I've always admired that about the Baptist Men, that group trained by  
the Baptist church to go into a crisis situation following a disaster, like a flood  
tornado, hurricane, earthquake, and just be present,  
early on, with food to share, hands to offer,  
and a shoulder to cry on.

In that way, we can perhaps best model the costly love of Jesus Christ, our truest friend,  
who didn't consider the risk or the personal cost of his actions,  
but only the benefit of his presence, God's benevolent presence,  
coming down to meet and be with those most in need. Amen.