

August 9, 2020

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year A

“Real Winds and Waves”

The lesson for today may be abundantly clear, but what actually happened is not. Let us set the scene first.

So, after feeding the multitude, Jesus sent the disciples away. Matthew says that he compelled them to leave on the boat and go on ahead. Now, John tells account of the incident, he tells that after feeding the multitude the crowd wished to come and make him a king by force (John 6:15). In the excited state of Palestine, a revolution might well have begun there and then. It was a dangerous situation, and the disciples might well have complicated it, for they too, were thinking of Jesus in terms of earthly power. Jesus sent away his disciples because a situation had arisen with which he could best deal alone, and in which he did not wish them to become involved.

When he was alone, he went up into a mountain to pray; and by this time the night had come. The disciples had set out back across the lake. One of the sudden storms, for which the lake was notorious for, had come down, and they were struggling against the winds and the waves, and making little progress.

If this story of the disciples at sea battered by wind and wave is not a story which speaks to our circumstance today, I surely do not know what is.

The possibility of being swamped by doubt and fear as much as real wind and waves seems to be as real these days as I have ever known it to be. I expect many of you will agree.

Who would have thought that something as small, as at first invisible, as so very unknown as a virus taken hold as pandemic would threaten to toss us off the boat as it has? In fact, if one thinks of the boat as the church as our community of faith, one might suggest that in our inability to all be together in the boat.

It is then that there is a real difficulty in knowing what happened. In verses 25 and 26, we read twice about Jesus walking on the sea. Professor Barclay says: ‘the truth is that there are two perfectly possible interpretations of this passage. It may be described as a miracle in which Jesus actually walked on the water. Or, it may equally mean that the disciples’ boat was driven by the wind to the northern shore of the lake, that Jesus came down from the mountain to help them when he saw them struggling in the moonlight, and that he came walking through the surf and the waves towards the boat, and came so suddenly upon them that they were terrified when they saw him. Both interpretations are equally valid. Some prefer one, and some the other.’

Whatever interpretation we choose, the significance is perfectly clear. In the hour of the disciplines' need, Jesus came to them. When the wind was contrary and life was a struggle, Jesus was there to help. No sooner had a need arisen that Jesus was there to help and save. We are like Peter, not necessarily having stepped out willingly at all, but rather tossed overboard, sinking step by step waterlogged out step.

Rev. Janet Hunt comments her commentary "Jesus Walking Toward Us in This Storm" "We know better, of course we do. The church is not the physical structure associated with its name. And it is not even only a place of safe keeping regardless of where or how the Church, God's people come together. Those who say that the Church is not known best and truest by how or where it gathers, but by where and how it is sent are entirely correct. If we have not come to this already, this particular mammoth storm will either batter us into this reality or we will perish in the process or, perhaps just likely, in some real sense both will be true.'

And Jesus coming to us in the storm is just as real. So it is, that I, like Peter, like all the disciples, am often afraid. And I don't speak of the healthy fear of a virus which is wily and deadly. I am afraid that I will not have the strength to stand up to those powerful forces which just want things to return to what we remember from the middle of March and before. When we shook hands freely, wrapped our arm around family, friends, and one another, regularly stepped aside to allow small

ones to run freely in our midst, gathered close over coffee and sweets on a Sunday morning, and out to our heart's contents. I am afraid that my own grief which mingle with that of countless others will cause me to bend before it is time, will push me to compromise or worse so as to appease the loudest, perhaps most hurting voices.

In life, the wind is often contrary. There are times when we are up against it and life is a desperate struggle with ourselves, with our circumstances, with our temptations, with our sorrows and with our decisions. At such a time, no one needs to struggle alone, Jesus comes to us across the storms of life, with a hand stretched out to save, and with his calm clear voice bidding us take heart and have no fear.

It does not really matter how we take this incident; it is in any event far more than the story of what Jesus once did in a storm; it is the sign and the symbol of what he always does for his people, when the wind is contrary and we are in danger of being overwhelmed by the storms of life.

But, still, I am afraid. I am afraid that the Church will never be the same as I remember. The Church is and has mostly been a place of community and kindness and nurturing for me. I have loved the gathering of God's people. It is certainly what drew me into becoming a member at Westminster. The kindness and love they showed me that very first Sunday Mom and I attended there. I certainly fear that we will

never be the same again. That some will not come back having now experienced the gift of leisure on Sunday morning, tuning in to worship in pajamas and favorite morning beverage, if at all.

And I am afraid that the Church will attempt to just return to normal as quickly as humanly possible. That we will not allow ourselves to be changed by all that has been.

I am afraid that we will too soon forget the disparities which this pandemic has made so apparent in a world which has always been darn comfortable to many, including me. I am afraid we will too soon forget the utter gift it is to be near to one another once more.

I am afraid as Peter was when he was walking out on the water to Jesus. Peter was known for acting on impulse and without thinking what he was doing. Professor Barclay comments in the Gospel of Matthew: ‘that is was Peter’s mistake that again and again he acted without fully facing the situation and without counting the cost. He was to do exactly the same when he affirmed undying and unshakable loyalty to Jesus and then denied his Lord’s name. and yet there are worse sins than that, because Peter’s whole trouble was that he was ruled by his heart and he might sometimes fail, his heart was always in the right place and the instinct of his heart was always love.’

‘Peter acted on impulse, he often failed and came to grief. It was always Jesus’ insistence that people should look at a situation in all its

bleak grimness before they acted. Jesus was completely honest with people; he always urged them to see how difficult it was to follow him before they set out upon the Christian way. A great deal of Christian failure is due to acting upon an emotional moment without counting the cost.'

'But Peter never finally failed, for always in the moment of his failure he clutched at Christ. The wonderful thing about him is that every time he fell, he rose again; and that it must have been true that even his failures brought him closer and closer to Jesus Christ.

'When Peter risked it all walking out on the water towards Jesus, he falters, Jesus reaches out and pulls him to safety, cementing in perhaps his most impetuous disciple an ever-clearer sense of who Jesus is' comments Rev Hunt.

And when Jesus climbs aboard that boat in the midst of those exhausted, frightened followers and the wind dies down and the sea is calmed, and everyone knows that Jesus is God's Own Son. And they bow to this truth. Body, mind, heart, and soul they bow to this life saving truth.

So, it is these days that I recognize the deadly power of this storm. And I am watching for Jesus, oh I am, to come walking across and through these threatening waves. And I am wondering what it is to move

towards Jesus even as he moves towards me, as Peter did. Even if I falter and fall, I wonder what that means for me, for you, for all of us today.

Our blindness to all the ways in which God's precious gifts are hoarded by two few and the many, many of God's Beloved whose lives are lived on the edge: for whom the battering waves never ever cease.

Our sometimes inability to see Jesus walking towards us, all the while we feel ourselves sinking beneath the waves.

For me, at least, it's the last one which is most pressing for me now, this yearning to know, to recognize Jesus at work in a time which is by so many measures marked by storm. This is most pressing because as I am able to somehow see Jesus, I expect all the rest will follow as well.

Surely this storm, and the promise of Jesus coming to us in the storm is doing this once more in me, in you, in the church, in the world.

Surely, we are being shaped for all the places Jesus calls us to, enabling us to walk on water, or not, into all that comes next.

Surely all of this must be so...

How has this time manifested as 'storm' for you?

How have you experienced Jesus walking towards you?

What makes you most afraid?

What gives you hope? What sustains you now?

How do you sense yourself being formed and shaped for all that will follow now?

Pastor Karen