

Sunday, August 9, 2020
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 14 (Year A)

Matthew 14.22-33

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/382174612766429>

(Sermon begins at about 15:25)

“Getting Out of the Boat”

It's times like this that I really feel sorry for Jesus. He's had a very long and emotional day. He just found out that his cousin John the Baptist had been beheaded in prison. In his grief, he withdraws to a deserted place, hoping to have a little alone time to process what has happened. But a crowd of people followed him, wanting to hear what words of wisdom he has for them. Being ever gracious, Jesus teaches them and even heals some of the sick. As the hour grows late, he demonstrates further compassion for the crowd by providing them with a meal—feeding 5,000 men, plus women and children. Now he is exhausted. He also recognizes that his disciples are exhausted. He puts them in a boat and sends them on their way while he dismisses the crowd. Finally, he can get a little alone time to recharge, both physically and spiritually.

But no. A Messiah's work is never done. Out on the sea, a storm whips up and threatens the lives of the disciples. So, it's Jesus to the rescue. Of course, it is not the disciples' fault that they get caught in a storm. Nor could they even be faulted for not knowing that a storm might be brewing. The Sea of Galilee is famous for storms developing unexpectedly. And sometimes quite violently. Jesus sets out, walking across the sea to his disciples. Of course, they are already freaking out because of the unexpected storm. Seeing a figure in the distance, coming directly toward them—not in a boat but walking on the water no less—would have sent them over the edge. Thinking it likely to be a ghost, they cried out in fear.

Before we move on to Jesus' rescue of the disciples and Peter's attempt at walking on water, it's worth staying with the scene in the boat a moment longer. While this was certainly a traumatic situation that befell the disciples, there is also a deeper meaning behind this scene. One that is applicable to us today. “In Hebrew scripture the sea is a metaphor for chaos. Like a turbulent sea, chaos causes a feeling that the world is upside down and makes us realize we are no longer in control. Whether we experience chaos due to tragedy, disaster, loss, change, or oppression, it is the very opposite of rest.”¹ Which is what both Jesus and the disciples were seeking.

But that's the way chaos presents itself. Regardless of cause, it is unexpected, catching those involved by surprise. I think we can all relate to that. After all, the last four and a half months have been nothing if not chaotic. One minute we're going about our lives, business as usual, and the next we are being told that everything is shut down and we are to shelter in place. Which, of course, brought all sorts of other things to worry about. Worrying about how to do things in a new way, while sheltered away from the rest of the world. Worrying about where and how we were going to get the necessities of life. Worrying about just having to go out into

public and risk being exposed to the coronavirus. And, as if we didn't have enough chaos to deal with, there was—there continues to be—the civil unrest in the wake of the death of George Floyd. Protests against the systemic racism that has been part of our government and institutions for centuries. And then things started opening again—sigh of relief—only to be partially shut down again after a few weeks, thanks to increases in the number of new cases and hospitalizations. This walking back causing its own sense of chaos as we tried to get a handle on what activities are permitted and what are not. The last few months have seen chaos, chaos, and more chaos. All of it taking a toll on us individually and collectively. And, like the disciples, sometimes even bringing fear—fear of what will happen next. Fear of what might appear on the horizon and make its way toward us, as a ghostly figure. So yeah, we can relate to the plight of the disciples, tossed about in the midst of chaos, uncertain what to do, other than to cry out for help.

As Jesus approached the boat and heard the expression of fear and the cries for help, he sought to calm the disciples. “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid” (Mt 14.27). We don't know about the rest of the disciples, but Jesus' words of comfort, of assurance, were enough for Peter. “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” To which Jesus replies, “Come” (Mt 14.28-29). You have to admire Peter's gumption. He was not going to let the present chaos get in the way of what he was called to do as a disciple. With his anxiety level ratcheted down thanks to Jesus' calming presence, Peter was all set to get back to the work at hand. The work of following Jesus. No matter where that might lead. Even out onto the water.

And at first, things were going pretty well. Peter got out of the boat and started walking toward Jesus. “But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out ‘Lord, save me!’” (Mt 14.30). Of course, Jesus does save him. He “immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, ‘You of little faith, why did you doubt?’” (Mt 14.31). Now I'm going to have to disagree with Jesus on his assessment of the situation. I'm going to give Peter the benefit of the doubt, so to speak. I don't think Peter had doubts. He knew exactly what he was doing when he dared to get out of that boat and head toward Jesus. He had faith that he could walk on water to get to Jesus. He was buoyed by the knowledge that his Lord had bid him “Come.” Peter knew that Jesus would not call him if he didn't have what it took to complete the task at hand.

No, I don't think Peter so much doubted, as he got distracted. As long as he was focused on Jesus, he was in good shape. He was making progress towards his goal. The minute he noticed the wind and the waves, the minute he allowed himself to be distracted by the chaos around him, the minute that he diverted his attention from Jesus, that's when things began to unravel. Of course, the wind and the waves were there the whole time. They were part of the chaotic scene. But while he was focused on Jesus, those other things were kept in perspective, kept in the background, where they belonged. Peter began to panic and to sink when he allowed himself to become focused on the wrong thing.

This is an important lesson for us, particularly in chaotic times. It is easy to become distracted by what is going on around us, particularly when there are conflicting messages about what is happening and what we should be doing. It's easy to get confused and to become focused on things that are part of the background and that we cannot really do anything about.

To prevent ourselves from becoming overwhelmed by the troubled waters of the world around us, we need to find ways of maintaining our focus on Christ and his message, and not to become distracted by the waves and the wind around us. I know, its easier said than done. With so much information swirling around us like so much wind and waves, its hard not to get swept up in it all. So, we need to shift our focus back to what is truly important. That’s where the church comes in. That’s part of why we exist. To be a place of shelter in the midst of the stormy chaos of the world. A shelter in the midst of, not a shelter away from, the stormy chaos. There’s a difference. The job of the church is not to deny the chaos. The job of the church is to acknowledge the chaos. The job of the church is to step into the chaos and to offer a better way of dealing with what is going on around us. As one commentator notes, “The key to faith and fullness of life in Christ is to follow Peter’s example and be willing to step out of the comfort and security of the boat and head into the troubled waters of the world to proclaim the love, mercy, and justice of God that we find in Jesus Christ.”²

That’s why throughout the current chaos, we have been intent on finding ways to continue to keep our people connected to the source of our strength—to God and to Christ. Not just through our regular Sunday worship services. But also, by providing daily opportunities for worship through Morning and Evening Prayer. By providing weekly Centering Prayer and Bible Study. By continually expanding the ways in which we reach out to parishioners, particularly those who are at more of a disadvantage during a time when we must rely so heavily on technology. And by continuing to engage in outreach ministries that take us outside of ourselves, that take us into the midst of the chaos that is our broken and hurting world, where we can demonstrate our commitment to Christ’s ways as opposed to the chaotic ways of the world.

Our primary purpose during these unusual and uncertain times is to be a place to connect with one another. To be a place that helps us regain our focus; shifting that focus from the wind and the waves back to Jesus, who bids us come to him as the source of protection. Who bids us come to him because he has something to offer. Who bids us—as his disciples—to come to him because he has a job for us to do. Having shifted our focus, we are called to go back out into the stormy chaos and continually be the voice of Christ who responds to those crying out in fear during such times of chaos. To share Christ’s message “Take heart . . . do not be afraid.”

In times of stormy chaos, we are not called to hunker down in the boat, cowering in fear. We are called to follow the lead of Peter, impetuous though he could be at times, and to get out of the boat. “We are called to step out in faith, even in the midst of troubled waters, if we are to be faithful to the call of Christ.”³ And if we continue to focus on him and on what he bids us to do, we will not sink, but will be able to weather whatever storms come our way.

¹ *Sundays and Seasons: Preaching Year A 2020* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2019), 223.

² Clifton Kirkpatrick, “Proper 14, Pastoral Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year A, Volume 3, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 335.

³ *Ibid.*