

Gospel - Mathew 14: 22-23

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon 8.9.20

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OK, who didn't try it as a kid? You know you did. Walking on water? In a county with over a thousand square miles of water, that would have been a neat trick.

That's how I viewed this story as a kid. But as an adult, as it says in the 13th chapter of First Corinthians, I have put away childish things. Mostly.

First, some context. Matthew wrote this book in the bible after Jesus' death and resurrection, during the years when the fledgling Christian Church was struggling and suffering. Its members were persecuted. It was difficult, even dangerous to meet.

Sound familiar?

Let me say that in no way do I compare the minor discomfort that we are feeling today with the persecution those early church members endured. I don't think anyone is going to be beheaded as a heretic over COVID-19, which was said to be Matthew's fate.

But we are in a boat. We are, many of us, at sea. And getting to the other shore is a bit of a bleak prospect as the pandemic toll rises here in the Northwest, across the US and throughout the world. The media amplifies our doubt and politicians' rhetoric ramps up our disbelief.

I've tried to take a few steps back from all of it. I've been asking myself, "What have I learned from this experience that I can use to enrich my life and those around me in the future? How can I use this to create a better tomorrow, rather than simply using my energy to wish for the good old days?"

Like the disciples, we are in a boat. All of us, together. Our beautiful church is shaped as many traditional worship spaces are, as an upside down ship. We call the part where you all normally sit a nave, derived from navy and navigation.

It is just a little bit of a modern day miracle that, through technology and Dedrick's skills, we've been able to build a bigger boat. A different boat that includes all of us in our homes. Thank you, Dedrick. Thank you, God.

So we are here together. Really. There are many definitions of the word "church," but all involve the words "community," or "assembly." We are a community. Do you feel it? I hope so. I know I do.

Now what? Week after week the toll rises and our good governor issues more directives. Last week Shelton schools made the decision to start the year all online. What does that mean to Kelsey, as a music teacher? What does that mean to kids? Parents, grandparents, and other caregivers?

We're trying to work from home, we're trying to minimize our interaction. We're trying to think creatively about so many things. Kelsey had a bit of conversation yesterday about how we might create a Festival of Lessons and Carols that people would want to tune in to. But, as I described to her, so many of these things are like being asked to write the end of the book when we haven't read the first half. We are in limbo, and my Catholic childhood friend explained in painful detail that limbo is NOT a good thing.

The disciples were in a boat, and despite traveling all night they'd only traveled about three miles. The Sea of Galilee is eight miles wide and 13 miles long. So less than halfway. The wind was against them, and it was by now the "fourth watch," between 3 and 6 in the morning. And don't forget that they'd already been through the feeding of the 5000 that day.

And they were "alone." Jesus had dismissed the crowds and gone off to pray.

In short, there are some parallels with living through four months of a pandemic lockdown.

Wait for it....not only do we have a boat, a great, big, virtual boat, we've got Jesus. He's walking on water, and while that's a pretty amazing feat that I defy you to imitate, what's even more amazing is his words: Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid. Another translation which I love is "do not be afraid. I am.

I am. Kind of encompasses everything, doesn't it. In the third chapter of Exodus, when Moses is confronted with God in the burning bush, we hear the words:

"I am who I am."^[a] He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you.'" ¹⁵ God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The Lord,^[b] the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you':

This is my name forever,
and this my title for all generations.

I am.

In the eighth chapter of the gospel of John, we learn that Jesus is the light of the world, and later in that chapter his Jewish audience is struggling with the concept that those who believe in Him will not taste death. Jesus tells the Jews: Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am."

Be not afraid. I am.

We are in this together, filling the St. David's boat and navigating across uncharted seas. Even though Jesus went to the mountain to pray, he is with us. And that brings me to Peter. Peter, Peter, Peter.

For a moment, he is walking on water along with Jesus. Until he loses his faith and starts to sink.

Brave Peter! Stupid Peter. I'm a strong swimmer, but despite that strength, I can't see myself stepping out of a boat that's three miles from shore, in a storm, at, oh, five o'clock in the morning after pushing against the wind all night.

Bless Peter for jumping in with both feet in the first place! But ye of little faith, you cannot do this on your own. And that goes for all of us. Every. Single. One. Jesus says, "Come." He invites us to step out of the boat, this boat of St. David's that has navigated through many seas since it was founded well over one hundred years ago.

So, I invite you, too. Come. Step out of the boat into the vast, roiling sea. Trust Jesus to keep us afloat.

As we sit, suspended in our living rooms and bedrooms and offices, watching church via YouTube. As we wait, wondering what impact the latest directives from our government will have.

As we ponder when we'll get back to normal – and what normal might look like.

As we write the next chapter of our book even though this chapter hasn't yet been put to paper, Jesus tells us not to be afraid.

This seems to be a particularly important message for a church calling a priest, sailing through uncharted waters of a pandemic, a church looking for shore. Even from the safety of our homes, we can step out of the boat, plan the next ministry, reach out to one another and to those "others," the disenfranchised in our community and beyond.

Our second lesson today, from Paul's letter to the Romans, describes our reward for stepping out of the boat: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." And later in the passage: "As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'"

And as we step out of the boat, let us remember God's command – not a request, but a command - from the first chapter, ninth verse in the book of Joshua:

Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.

Whether you're stepping out of the boat to reach for a new ministry, whether you're helping to chart a course for St. David's transition, or whether you're praying for courage to go to the grocery store, hear him:

Be not afraid. I am.

Amen.