



August 9, 2020  
The 10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Rev. Emily Williams Guffey  
Matthew 14:22-33

Good morning! I'm here at Orchard Lake (which is not too far from my house), and I figured we would see some boats out today.

We've just heard St. Matthew's telling of that famous story of the time when Jesus sent the Disciples out on a boat, and by the early morning hours there was a big storm and the winds were fierce and the waves were huge, and the Disciples were very afraid.

If it were stormy today, well, I wouldn't be outside by the lake and these boats would also not be out.

But what do we do when we find ourselves on a boat in the middle of a storm that has come up unexpectedly...and we feel very afraid...and are options are limited? What then do we do?

I've been feeling a lot lately that we are in a boat, of sorts, right now, and the winds are very strong, and the waves are very big. And we are afraid, I am afraid of what I see happening all around us in our country. And the fear is intensified because we are far from one another physically.

The scripture in Matthew's telling says that the Disciples and their boat were battered by the waves. They were far from land and the wind was against them.

I've been feeling lately that I know that feeling, especially that of from being far from land.

We are far from one another physically.  
We are far from sharing communion together.  
We are far from singing together.  
We are far from visiting friends without trepidation.  
We are from from workplaces operating as usual.  
We are far from schools opening in person.  
We are far from a healthy economy.  
We are far from a stable democracy.  
We are battered by waves and rocked by winds.  
We feel so alone.

And we are far from shore.

We are not far from home. That is exactly where we are, in fact, yet we long for the home that we have in one another. And if we're honest, we're longing to see God among us. We might be asking, *"God, where are you? Have you sent us out here all alone?"*

We cherish and we embrace the many creative solutions and adaptations that are being made and will continue to be made within our new boundaries of safety. Yet we might not be able to help gaping at how far from land we are.

And even more, I believe, it is sacred to lament our distance from physical community, our distance from the comfort of familiarity.

I won't say we should lament our distance from normalcy, since many normal parts of our collective lives obviously don't work. I'm thinking of the normalcy of "whiteness," the normalcy of white supremacy. Obviously, these are destructive and have no place in our beloved community.

What I'm saying is that perhaps most of all we lament our distance from justice. We feel so alone and we feel so afraid and that makes the distance...hurt...worse.

It affects our vision, too. We're seeing some very strange things, aren't we? We're seeing things on the news, in our neighborhoods that grow more bizarre and foreboding by the day. And in our fear and isolation, we can't help but perceive those as harbingers of our own demise.

Pastor Anthony was teaching us at Bible Study on Wednesday that he had read that in Jesus' time when you saw a ghost at the lake or walking on the lake, they were a ghost of somebody who had lost their life at sea. And so those Disciples in the boat on that fearful morning feared for their lives, because who they thought was a ghost walking toward them on the water was, they thought, an omen of death approaching them as their own final moments neared.

It was not their own death that was coming...at least not the one that they thought. They would not drown (but Peter would come close). They would not drown, but they would die to their previously held expectations, their previously held assumptions of what was true, their previously perceived boundaries of the possible.

Interestingly, just the day before they were with Jesus on that remote meadow, far from shelter, that day when there was not nearly enough food for themselves and all the people who had followed them out there to listen to what Jesus was saying. The scripture says that on that day there were 5000 people, not counting the women and children. And so, if you're with me, let's assume there were at least 10,000 people there.

And Jesus instructs the Disciples to bring forward the food that they do have. The Disciples balk. They say, *"We have five loaves and two fish. That's impossibly sufficient."* And yet, they broke the bread and shared the fish, and no one remained hungry. All were nourished deeply.

And so out at the lake, those Disciples have already witnessed these boundaries of the possible...breaking. Here on the lake, the Disciples perceive Jesus walking towards them and they hear him saying, *"Really. I mean it. I am. I am who I am. I am who I will be. Do not be afraid."*

Peter, plucky Peter, asks, *"Really? Prove it!"* Jesus says, *"Come here then."*

Peter sets his sight on Jesus, on this Word walking closer and closer to them, fixing his eyes upon Jesus, like a laser of light is tethering them, and he steps out onto the water. And then he takes another step. And then the wind blows, and he realizes how impossible it is that he is walking on water, and he sinks. And he splashes around, and the Disciples in the boat are watching incredulously and, I like to imagine, possibly teasing him, too.

And Jesus asks gently, in my imagination, *"Why did you doubt? You had faith the size of five loaves of bread and two fish. You had faith the size of a mustard seed. And that is enough faith to do hard things, to do impossible things, to do unlikely things, to do the things of God."*

In the winds of fear and the waves of despair, my friends, we must keep our eyes on Jesus. We must fix our eyes on him as if a laser of light is tethering us together. Even though the darkness and fog might prevent us from seeing more than 20 feet in front of us, as Sally suggested last week at coffee hour, we must keep our eyes on Jesus...for he is the only way that we will be saved.

During a time of transition, during my discernment of Holy Orders, a priest and mentor told me simply one day, *"Stay close to Jesus."* She could see in my future the waves and the winds that would come, not only in the process of discernment, but those of life...the ups and downs, personal and collective.

Stay close to Jesus.

Stay close to Jesus.

These words are so simple, yet how many times do they slip from our sight?

We set our sight on Jesus, which is to say that we set our sight on the Word that is made flesh, the Word that is near us, the Word that is already written on our hearts, the Word and the love that will not let us go. It will not let us go.

Even when we fall and we fail and we become distracted and we become discouraged and we are weighed down with fear and despair, God's grace shows up. And God's grace will not let us go. God's grace bears us up. It is close to us.

Can you see it?

Do you believe it?

God's grace is hard to see, because it is always unlikely. It can appear out of nowhere. It is literally incredible, and it is never deserved. And it saves us. It bears us up. It calls us out beyond our fear and beyond ourselves. And it draws us back to the heart of God and to the hearts of one another.

My dear friends, it is true, that we, as a people, are out at sea. And although the weather is pleasant outside today, the gales that rip among us are fierce. And the waves of disease — physical, racial, economic, environmental, political — are so massive and unrelenting, that we rightly fear that we may capsize.

These are realities that may not change for some time. Our fear might endure. We might not be able to see more than a few feet in front of us for days, weeks, months, years even. This is a long storm.

And, fearfully, we might look back on even these days and consider them mere breezes compared to what may lay ahead of us. Either way, and no matter what may come, no matter what winds and waves are ahead of us...we must keep our eyes on Jesus. We must look for his grace, and trust that it is near.

And when we feel relieved, even in fleeting moments, by that grace, we must then extend such grace and mercy and forbearance and fearlessness to one another.

For God's grace truly is stronger than our fear.