

“Fear Not the Storm”
 Matthew 14:22-33
 A sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas M. Donley
 March 14, 2021
 University Baptist Church
 Minneapolis, MN

*When the storm of life are raging stand by me;
 When the storm of life are raging stand by me;
 When the world is tossing me, like a ship upon the sea;
 Thou who rulest wind and water, stand by me.*

We are halfway through then Lenten Season. We have already looked at the challenges that come from the wilderness, secrets and scarcity. We’ll look at crowds, expectations and the empty tomb before we’re done. Today we look at storms.

There are storms around us these days.

There are the literal storms, like the ones that brought Texas to a standstill—compromising the power grid. There are the now annual firestorms that hit California and last until the rainy season. Of course we remember the devastating hurricanes of Eta and Iota that destroyed the infrastructure and lives of so many in Honduras and Nicaragua. The common denominator for all of these storms are climate change. That’s a different sermon, but bears mention today.

There is the storm of Coronavirus, and we’re wondering if we are on the edge or in the relatively calm eye of the storm—where the respite is a precursor to higher waves.

There is the obvious storm of the Derek Chauvin trial. His actions and those around him fueled the winds which devastated our country. The tempests had been brewing, but maybe this was the first time that many of us recognized the storms, when one man or a system becomes judge, jury and executioner of another.

There are the storms of anger and resentment that have been raising the barometric pressure of our lives.

One took place in DC a few months ago. But it’s a no less dramatic storm that is seeking to deny voting rights to millions and permanently disenfranchise them, oddly in the name of freedom.

Some liken school reopening as a storm, and yet we wonder where to get vulnerable children the mental health resources they have craved this past year. We wonder which storm is worse and make the best choices we can.

Some of us live with storms in our own households.

Some hold storms in our psyches.

And we’re searching for that hand to steady us and save us.

There’s a reason we sing so often about storms. It’s a constant companion.

*Through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light.
 Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home.*

The story of Jesus walking on water through a storm is recorded in Mark and John's Gospels, ironically in the 6th chapter of each. Matthew's version differs a bit and it alone has Peter's impulsive conversation with Jesus and his own walking on water. We'll get to that.

But first, we need to address fear.

If fear were a character in a Greek tragedy, it would wear many masks. And the Gospel would be a series of plays about how we are to conquer fear for a higher purpose.

Today's tragedy/comedy/redemption story starts in prayer, develops in terror, and ends in worship. Fear changes its mask throughout and has distraction and faithlessness as its accomplices. The main point of the Gospel is Fear Not. So today, we consider Fear Not the Storm.

Today's scripture follows right on the heels of Jesus' feeding of the 5,000, which follows the news of John the Baptist's execution by the state—a foreshadowing of Jesus' eventual execution for the crime of being too provocative and challenging to the precarious status quo. We know from last week's scripture that Jesus was trying to get away to be by himself. He got in a boat and the crowds followed him along shore. The disciples pleaded with him to feed them.

This time, he sent the disciples into a boat so he could go to a mountain to pray. Mountains are thin places where God is often more present. Think about the mountain top experiences of the Bible:

Mount Ararat where Noah's Ark came to rest after 40 days of storms.

Mount Moriah where God stopped Abram from slaying his son, Isaac. The Hebrew people would later place the temple on this same mountain and call it Jerusalem.

Mount Sinai where Moses spoke to God in the burning bush.

Mount Carmel where Elijah battled with the prophets of Baal.

Mount Tabor where Jesus was transfigured.

Golgotha, the mountain where the Centurion, gazing upon the crucified Jesus, said "surely this man is the son of God."

Less than 24 hours before he was assassinated, MLK said, "We've got some difficult days ahead of us but that doesn't really matter to me now, because I have been to the mountaintop and I have seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know that we as a people will get to the Promised Land."

The scripture tells us that while Jesus was on this mountain of contemplation, a storm rose up on the sea. The boat in which the disciples sailed started to list to and fro. Now, many of the disciples were fishermen and were used to storms and waves. They knew what to do. They were not really afraid of the waves and the wind and the storm. They were doing their level best to guide the boat while bailing and using their bodies as counter-weights as the boat listed from one side to another.

Soon a figure arose, calmly walking on the water. They wondered if it was a ghost or some kind of demon. Maybe it was a big fish ready to swallow them. That's when they cried out in fear. It wasn't the storm that scared them, it was the ghostly figure approaching the boat. That's when Jesus spoke to them. He repeated his mantra, "Be not afraid. And then he added "It is I". When Moses asked who was speaking to him in a burning bush, the voice said, "It is I" or I AM who I AM. The disciples were not afraid of the storm, at least the physical storm. They were afraid of the apparition. The angel of death or was it the angel of life? An omen or a savior?

"thou who rulest wind and water stand by me."

That's when we get the words of impulsive Peter. Perhaps hiding his own fear with bravado, he said, "If it is you, command me to come and walk with you on the water." Maybe egged on by his fellow disciple Thomas, this doubting Peter called Jesus' bluff. 'Oh yeah, nice trick. Bet you can't let me walk on water.' To which Jesus responded, 'come on out, join me on my royal sea-walk.' To which Peter, likely said, "Darn"—or something like that. It's easier to make a show of things from the safety of a boat. It's another thing to get into the deep water with Jesus.

Some of us got into deep water over the summer as the storms were raging across Minneapolis. Pent-up despair hit its zenith and people took to the streets. And we were reminded how unpredictable a storm can become. But people were hurting and in this vortex, there was a truth that was revealed. God is always in the storm, even when it seems all is lost.

Here we are a year later. People have peeled the scales off of our collective eyes and have dealt with the reality of systemic racism. Art has arisen. We see the storm and like the disciples, navigate through it. We can no longer ignore it.

Jesus offers us the opportunity to do something different. Every leap of faith takes a first step.

So Peter stepped out of the boat walked toward Jesus, his own bridge o'er troubled waters.

Jesus, I imagine looked in his eyes and reminded him that I Am, the same one who spoke out of the burning bush grants courage in the most dire circumstances, banishes fear if we only believe.

No storm can shake my inmost calm, while to that rock I'm clinging since love is lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?"

For a moment, they were in sync. Peter saw the possibilities. It was more than a trick of walking on water. It was a symbol for transforming himself and his community. Jesus looked into his eyes and all but said, 'This is what being fishers of people means. This is what discipleship means. It means going through the storms.' And for a moment he could see that Peter could see it, too. But he could also see his fear creeping in.

We know what happens next, Peter takes his eyes off the prize. He feels a gust of wind. He realizes he's doing something foolish. His knees begin to buckle. His sea legs start to wobble. Just then, Jesus reaches out and grabs Peter. They climb into the boat. The storm ends and the disciples foreshadow the Centurion's words, saying 'truly this is the son of God.'

Jesus saves, as we know he would.

Jesus saves Peter in spite of his arrogance.

In spite of his faithlessness.

In spite of his fear of the storm.

In spite of his impulsiveness.

That's the good news.

For if Jesus can save Peter, maybe there's hope for us.

Through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light take my had precious lord, lead me home.

As we traverse our world today, what scares us? What shiny thing distracts us? Pay attention to that fear. Lean in, as they say.

All that anxiety is an energy that says pay attention.

Then remember that when the storms surround us, we are not alone.

We are not left comfortless.

There is one or a community that stands out on the water, ready to grab us when we stumble.

That's what the church is for, with all our faults and foibles.

We are to be the hands and feet of Jesus, saving those in the midst of the storm.

No storm can shake our inmost calm while to that rock we're clinging. Since Love is Lord of heaven and earth, how can we keep from singing.

As we traverse this sea, recognize that we need to constantly find ways to go deeper—to seek out that which makes us uncomfortable. To seek out the storms and remember that there is one who stands beside us in the midst of the water. The one who has power over the storms, if we just stand with him.

Yes, you see, the storm did not cease when Jesus walked on the water. It ceased when Peter took the step out into the water and then said that he was ready to stand with Jesus, even when it seemed a perilous thing.

My friends, we often find ourselves in deep water. The deep water may be the result of the choices we make. The deep water may be the predicament that we find ourselves in. The deep water may be a conflict. It may be fear. It may be that gray murky unknown. And we all are faced with that choice. But when we see it, we are alongside one who has the power over the storms.

Take a step into the foolishness of the Gospel. Fear not the storm. For you do not go alone.

Remember that we stand alongside the one who calms the storm. That one looks into our eyes, knows our fears, knows our doubts, knows our seeming inadequacy and supports us anyway. And this one whispers in our ears, fear not the storm.

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