

Matthew 14:22-33 "Beginning to Sink" Rev. Janet Chapman 8/16/2020

So a couple weeks ago, my sisters, niece, Mikayla and I got to take my mom to a cabin near Bend for a couple nights which was thoroughly enjoyable. It sat on a pristine lake whose borders included Mt. Batchelor on one side and the South Sister on another. I had brought my kayak with me and couldn't wait to go for the first time this year. Mikayla rented a paddleboard, a hot new sport, and next to surfing, is now one of her favorite outdoor activities. We both headed onto the lake but quickly became aware that the farther one went from the shore, the windier it became. As I headed towards the middle of the lake, tiny little waves were cresting and the kayak was bouncing up and down. As friend Val Jones taught me, I headed right into the waves without fear almost as if saying, "Come on wind, is that all you've got?" It was quite empowering, until I got distracted by a soaring eagle and neglected to notice that the boat had veered directions so now the waves were hitting full force on my right side, my weaker side since the break. I tried to correct by paddling as hard as I could, but only ended up going forward rather than turning back into the waves. So then I switched directions too quickly and almost lost my balance toppling over. Righting myself enough to prevent chaos, I pulled my oar in the boat and just sat taking a few deep breaths, being reminded one should never underestimate the power of the wind. Mikayla's paddleboarding experience included several successful stands on the board, and then she too encountered that powerful wind which suddenly knocked her off the board with no warning. My sister Sharon, thankfully, was kayaking not far away and was able to help retrieve the oar, board, and life jacket which all went in different directions. Mikayla said it was a big enough fall that she took in water as she sank deep, coming up sputtering and coughing. But this has not dissuaded her from doing it

again, so this week we bought a used paddleboard and I might learn to do it as well – might, I said.

Our scripture features the disciples in a boat who encounter some rough winds, so rough, they feel as if they might drown. Such sudden storms were a characteristic weather pattern of the region producing whitecaps on the sea and enough force to topple inland trees. Today's story and its parallel texts in Mark 6 and John 6 have been used over the centuries to remind us that Jesus often calls us to go into uncharted waters. Yet even when we go in without much faith, he will never abandon us. When we find ourselves flailing, sinking down and trying to catch our breath, God stands ready to provide what is needed to rise and survive. Matthew shares the story keeping in mind the newfound community of believers who are struggling in uncharted waters and may feel like they are going under. The image of choppy seas and the reality that when we set out, as the early church did, to undertake Christ's mission on earth, we will find ourselves in troubled waters. These storms have been frequent in the history of the church but the storm we are living in now feels more like a hurricane. It feels like those derecho winds that hit Iowa last week devastating towns, wiping out power, and causing folks to flee for their lives. Like hurricanes, we have a name for this storm and it took the life of our beloved Jon Emery and possibly 200,000 more by Labor Day, just in our nation. Dr. Nabarro, the World Health Organization special envoy recently said, "This virus isn't going away; it is really dangerous; it doesn't get bored; it really relishes things if we get bored or distracted because it can cause more trouble; this virus has only one purpose, to multiply and multiply and multiply... as humanity, we've got to learn to live with it and adjust accordingly." It is scary stuff as we are now dependent upon each other for a future and when we talk of "each

other” as Christopher Burkett notes, there is no taking into account for community boundaries, old loyalties, family differences, nationality or any other ways we have previously kept to ourselves. The old marker posts have been pulled down, and none of us know how this is going to end. Every single one of us is acting in a disaster movie not of our own making. The hardest thing about COVID, maybe the most scary, is that it is hard to control your response to it. Sometimes we feel strong and able to see it through, other times worried and fitfully anxious, unable to think straight; sometimes I’m encouraged by the neighborliness I see in others and sometimes I’m outraged at the carelessness; sometimes I’m bored with it all, and other times I long for nothing to be on my mind – my emotions tossing, storming, calming, like clashing ocean currents.

Then I read this story and others like it and I hear God’s voice, “Peace, be still. Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” The disciples battered boat has drifted far from the shore, where Jesus has remained to take some time alone. More than likely, their sails are destroyed, their oars lost, their energy sapped, and they are at the mercy of a boat which is now under nature’s control. Early in the morning, Jesus walks towards them on the waters, seemingly unphased by nature’s fury, or the laws of gravity. The disciples see a figure coming to them and instantly think it is a ghost – after all they have been through, facing down that fierce wind, you’d think they’d be singing, ‘I ain’t afraid of no ghost,’ but ghostbusters they are not. Matthew alone presents the dialogue that occurs between Peter and Jesus at this point. Hearing their fearful cries, Jesus says, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” Why “take heart” I wonder? Why not, “Buck up, be brave, have some fortitude for crying out loud!” Another translation equal to “take heart” is “have courage.” The root meaning of the English word

“courage” is the Latin word “cor” and the French “coeur” meaning heart. Thus, Jesus might be saying to his friends, to us, “Faith means living out of your heart. You are going to have to lead, live, and love with your heart.”

Peter is drawn to the Master’s words. “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” If it is Jesus, Peter thinks, then he will be able to walk on the water to Jesus. Jesus said, “Come,” so Peter gets out of the boat and starts walking on the water. But when he notices the strong wind, he becomes scared, and beginning to sink, cries out, “Lord, save me.” In every great story with any heart, there is a point of sinking – we remember the stories where someone sinks, because we remember when we have been that someone. Peter needs to know if it is really Jesus. How can anyone really trust that God will be with us always, to the end of the age? I can imagine Jesus’ answer would be something like, “Well, it’s certainly not because you will be able to walk on water, if that’s what you are thinking.” Miracles get a bad rap from some of us who try to use them as tests of authenticity, as proofs of God’s power. L. Michael White says we miss the point of biblical miracles if we question whether or not they happened, whether Jesus made people walk on water or not and such. The miracle story in the Bible is not interested in whether it ever happened or not. People at that time believed that these sorts of miracles happened all the time. Healings were in fact commonplace miracles performed more than just by Jesus according to historical records. The point of the miracle story is more than just the expectation that it could happen, or that it did. It is a statement about their belief in the person whom they say made it happen. In other words, the stories are more about the presentation of belief and theology than they are about worrying about reality

or non-reality of miracles. Jesus says to Peter, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” When they all got into the boat, the disciples worshipped him saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

Matthew’s community was as storm-tossed as we are, only for them it wasn’t a virus, it was the outrage of their community about this new upstart faith in Christ. In the midst of chaos, God revealed God’s self and continues to do so. Symbolic hands reach out to catch us and bring us back into the boat. It is a reminder to all of us who know what it is to waver between faith and doubt, trying to keep such things in balance, so that when we sink, we can reach out in confident surrender. You see, faith doesn’t save us from trials and tribulations, it gives us strength to face them. It gives us the direction to point when we get distracted by blowing winds. It reveals our belief in the One who shows us how to live out of our hearts. It is not we who keep the faith but faith who keeps us. So when the winds blow, the storms of living cause trouble, and we have ignored our dependence upon each other, hear the words spoken once more, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid!” Amen.