

## *Wind and Waves*

Sermon preached by the Rev. Mary Keenan

Sunday, August 9, 2020 10th Sunday after Pentecost

Readings: Romans 10:5-15, Gospel: Matthew 14:22-33

When I was in my early 20s, I went on my first trip outside the US. For most of a summer, I stayed with friends and in hostels and traveled around the United Kingdom on trains and buses. About halfway through my trip, I went for a week to Northern Ireland - to the town of Ballycastle on the northern coast - to go on retreat with other twenty-somethings at a place called Corrymeela. Corrymeela is an ecumenical center that brings together people of political, religious, and ideological differences to promote reconciliation. It was created as a response to the horrors of WWII and the then-brewing sectarian troubles in Northern Ireland.

In any case, one day our group planned a camping trip to nearby Rathlin Island. We lugged tents, sleeping bags, and other gear and got on a small ferry - the only way to get to and from the Island across a rather exposed portion of the North Atlantic called the Sea of Moyle.

It was an average summer day - which for Northern Ireland means it was chilly, windy, and damp. As we got going, I realized it was going to be a bumpy ride. Apparently, this was normal; no one else was concerned about the size of the waves. But about five minutes into the crossing, I started to feel the bumpiness all the way in the pit of my stomach. I must have looked green because one member of our group took pity and gave some helpful advice - look at the clouds, she said. "Watching the clouds will help because they don't move as much as everything else around you."

She was right. Fixing my eyes on something steady calmed the rest of my body. I spent nearly the whole journey staring at the clouds - grateful there were clouds to look at! By the time we landed, I was ready to set up camp and, because it was UK camping, head to the local pub.

Traveling by boat can be luxurious or harsh, smooth sailing or tumultuous waves. In some cases, it is still the only way to get from one place to another - and that was more true in Jesus' day than in ours. Matthew's gospel introduces us to disciples who have an ongoing relationship with boats - some are fishermen who made a living on the sea, others lived close to the sea and knew the rhythms of wind and water as part of daily life. They and Jesus are periodically getting into or out of boats for travel or respite.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus has told the disciples to get in a boat and go ahead to the other side. They have just finished a day of healing and feeding crowds of people. It is time for the next stop on their missionary journey. It isn't a stormy night, but it is windy, and we are told that they were "battered by the waves" and "the wind was against them." So the disciples, plenty of them experienced seamen, are not having an easy time.

While I might be afraid in such a situation - on the open water at night in a rough wind - they are not afraid until they see something entirely out of the ordinary. They see Jesus walking on the water, across the choppy waves toward them. They think it is a ghost.

Let's remember what the disciples knew about the metaphysical meaning of water. It is a source of both life and death. Based on their lived experience, the sea is a way to make a living and a way to lose a life. They also understand the religious use of water to symbolize chaos and danger. And they have memorized the scriptures that tell about the spirit of God moving over water in creation and the people of Israel walking through water to freedom.

If God is the creator and liberator who controls water, then this apparition walking on water towards them...well, who is he?

It is frightening whether you think it is a ghost or the living God. Jesus tries to calm their fears, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

And Peter takes a risk. He's afraid, but willing to take a chance. He asks a very peculiar question: "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."

He doesn't ask Jesus to still the wind or calm the waves, or even to come into the boat. He asks to go out onto the water where the danger is greatest, but also where Jesus is. He is asking to be like Jesus.

Jesus invites him, "Come."

The first few steps out of the boat are successful, but then a strong wind whips up, distracts him, and Peter is once again afraid. This time, not of Jesus, but of being swallowed by the water, by the chaos. He asks for help, "Lord, save, me!" And Jesus holds out his hand.

“You of little faith, why did you doubt?” Jesus asks him. It is a rebuke, but Peter is not a failure in this story. Peter trusted Jesus enough to take a big risk. A bigger risk than anyone else in the boat. And his risk yields amazing results.

His little faith was not enough to overcome his fear of the wind and he took his eyes, his focus, off of Jesus. I’m reminded of the advice my long ago friend on the ferry gave me: look to the clouds, fix your eyes on something steady.

Peter faltered, as we all do when we take a risk for faith, when we take a risk to carry out Jesus’ mission. And when he faltered, Jesus was there with an outstretched hand. Not only that, Jesus joined all the disciples in the boat, the waters calmed, and the disciples recognized who Jesus was. “Truly you are the Son of God.”

Peter’s fear led to greater trust. Peter’s risk led to a revelation for everyone on the boat. It taught them something about Jesus and their relationship to him. He is the Son of God who can rescue us from chaos.

Like the disciples on their boat, my Northern Irish friends and I made it to our destination to continue our “mission” of fellowship and reconciliation at a campsite. And like the disciples, the journey itself was also part of the mission. A time to pay attention, learn, and accept a hand of support. Like Peter, I learned that keeping my focus on something steady keeps me calm in rough seas.

The church is that band of disciples in a boat. And like those first disciples, Jesus put us in the boat, the church, so that we can be together on our mission, God’s mission. It will not always be smooth sailing in the church, even those of us who are seasoned sailors will be battered by the waves. The wind will sometimes be against us. It can be frustrating when all that turbulence keeps us from reaching the shore - the work we thought God wanted us to do.

Boats are transportation after all, they take us to a destination. But sometimes the journey is also a destination. Sometimes mission requires us to see God at work in unexpected places and unexpected ways. In the waves and the wind.

We are living in such a time, in rough seas. At this point in any other year, our congregation would have served meals at Community First, conducted the weekly shower ministry at Trinity Center, supported low-income students at our neighborhood elementary school, and maybe even sent another team to serve refugees at the border. But we have not been able to land on those shores to engage in those works of mission. Instead, we are still at sea, tossed about by chaos in all areas of our community life -

health, the economy, public safety. The injustice built into our social structures - including systemic racism - is drowning the most vulnerable among us. What can we do?

The story of the disciples in their battered boat reminds us of the importance of this at-sea time: Part of being a disciple includes being in turbulent seas. It includes trust to step out into the wind and also rescue when we falter.

The challenges we face are not tests of our faith or worthiness! (Remember, it is Peter in this story who tests Jesus, not the other way around.) No, the challenges we face are part of our mission. The Kingdom of God that Jesus is proclaiming, that he is teaching the disciples to proclaim, the Kingdom of God is breaking into a world still governed by greed, fear, and division. Confronting those realities will cause turbulence. Jesus meets us in that turbulence.

Jesus invites the disciples - and us - on a mission to create a Kingdom community. Part of that work is taking the Kingdom values of love and justice into a stormy world. Part of that work is taking risks, like Peter, stepping out of the boat, trying, falling. Because it is in the risk-taking and even in the falling that we are rescued and reminded of God's love for us.

My Northern Irish friends and I were on a mission - to camp, but also to build trust and learn from one another. From them, I learned to focus on something steady to weather stormy seas.

The disciples were on a mission - to proclaim the Kingdom of God. They learned that sometimes the unexpected delays on that journey lead to increased faith.

We are on a mission - a mission that feels interrupted. It is not! Our little St. Mark's boat is being battered by the waves and the wind feels against us. Yet it is into this chaos that Jesus comes to us, rescues us, and joins us for the rest of the journey.

AMEN