

3.30.08

Do Not Be Afraid

John 6:16-24

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Welcome: One week ago, our Call to Worship ended with **Matthew 6:34**, “*So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.*” Little did we know the worries and troubles that would follow in the United States and around the world. Throughout history there have been events that have caused people to be worried, troubled, or fearful. Plagues, wars, and natural disasters have threatened health, peace, and safety. We’re in uncharted territory and none of us knows where things will be one week from today.

When we turn to the Bible, we’re reminded that God’s people have often been faced with moments of life altering change and had to rapidly adjust to new circumstances. **Abraham and Sarah** were called to leave their homeland and begin a journey without knowing their destination. In a matter of days **Joseph** went from being his father’s favorite son to being sold into slavery. **The Hebrew people** went from the soul and body killing drudgery and predictability of slavery in Egypt to the liberating and frightening freedom of life in the wilderness. **Daniel** and his friends were carried away from their homes and taken to a new country with different customs and beliefs and they needed to figure out how to practice their faith in new ways in a completely different context. **The early church** was faced with disruptive change when persecution began after the killing of Stephen and the first members of the Way had to figure out how to do church in smaller groups dispersed throughout the region.

We are not the first people to face challenging circumstances and we can learn what is helpful in days like these from those who have gone before us. Yes, the unknown lies ahead, much as it did for the Israelites during the Exodus and for the early church. Many people are fearful and anxious especially the most vulnerable among us. In the face of all that is taking place we turn to God for comfort and strength. **Psalms 46:1-2** helps us to keep things in perspective reminding us that “*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.*”

Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea.”

Isaiah 41:10 *Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.*

It is in this spirit that we continue to worship God.

Opening Prayer

Dear God, we thank you because you have spoken through your Word, your prophets, your Son and your Spirit. We're grateful that even amid the world's despair and turmoil that you're still speaking the same timeless message. You love us. You don't leave us to face our troubles alone. You invite us to faith, not fear, trust, not worry, yet you call us to faith and trust precisely because in life and especially these days, there are reasons to be fearful and worried. Help us to continue to look to the things we can do that are in our control. We can read your Word, we can pray, we can go for walks, we can call our neighbors and check on them, we can share what we have with others. Use us to demonstrate your love, grace and mercy in these days and we will continue to look to you even as we pray... Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread

and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil

for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

Congregational Prayer

God of Grace and God of Glory, on your people pour your power. Grant us wisdom grant us courage, for the living of these days. Amid all the life-altering changes that have descended upon us so quickly we thank you for signs of your presence. We thank you for stories of people helping their neighbors, of schools providing pick up lunches, people buying groceries for seniors afraid to go into a store, for businesses looking out for people like U Haul offering free storage for 30 days to college students who suddenly had to vacate their residence halls.

We lament, mourn, and grieve for the many levels of loss that millions of people are experiencing. For the sick and the dying and their loved ones. For students in high school and college who are losing classes, sports, trips, and experiences that can't be replaced. We pray especially for high school and college seniors who instead of enjoying the pinnacle of their experience have suddenly had it taken away. We pray for those who had weddings, birthdays, anniversaries, funerals and other events that have been postponed or cancelled. We pray for those whose incomes and livelihoods are now in much greater jeopardy than they were a week ago. Inspire us to be generous and ready to share what we have as individuals and as a church in these challenging times.

I pray for the people around the world including in our church family who are in the age group most vulnerable to the Covid-19 virus. Help us all to engage in healthy practices to keep one another safe even if we're not experiencing any symptoms. We pray for those in nursing homes or hospitals who may be feeling afraid and isolated now that virtually no one can visit them. With more and more closures by the hour, and society moving toward a standstill we pray for strength, resilience, and hope.

A wise woman (Barbara Brown Taylor) once said, *"We do not lose control of our lives. What we lose is the illusion that we were ever in control in the first place."* As this virus reminds us that we are not in control of so much that touches our lives, help us to put our focus where it will help us and others. We're thankful for our daily bread and the ability to talk on the phone and hear the voice of a friend. To go for a walk and feast on all that the season of Spring is bringing

forth: the sound of birds, the blue skies, the bright sun and the lengthening days, the delight of moonlight, the sounds of the waves, and all the gifts of nature. Even people who may not be able to walk a distance, can look out a window or sit outside and see your gifts all around them.

We can listen to music that cheers and moves our soul or sing with one another like the people of Siena, Italy. We can write letters and send cards especially to those with no internet access. Writing out and praying what we are grateful for and going deeper in prayer baring our soul and pouring out our prayers for others as well as continued gratitude.

Give us greater attentiveness and awareness of the small yet delightful pleasures of life – the joy of laughter and humor, a walk on the beach, the taste of a favorite tea, coffee or ice cream. May we appreciate more what we may have been taking too much for granted.

In these days of social distancing, quarantining, and physical separation – help us to stay spiritually and emotionally connected. Inspire and motivate us to pray, think, and plan what we can do to help someone else and continue to pour out your comfort and reassurance.

Finally, we praise you, God, for the doctors, nurses, technicians and all in the medical profession who seek to bring about the healing of our bodies. We bless you for their gentleness and patience, for their knowledge and skill. Make our doctors the prophets and soldiers of your kingdom, which is the dominion of health and joyous life. Strengthen in their whole profession the consciousness that their calling is holy and that they, too, are disciples of the saving Christ. We ask all this in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

Sermon

Do Not Be Afraid

John 6 begins with Jesus feeding 5,000 people after which he withdraws to a mountain by himself to get away from the crowd (he practiced some social distancing) and to have some solitude with God. Today's reading begins on the evening of that day.

"When evening came, **his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea** to Capernaum. **It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them**. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, **and they were terrified**. But he said to them, ***"It is I am do not be afraid."*** Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.

The next day the crowd that had stayed on the other side of the sea saw that there had been only one boat there. They also saw that Jesus had not got into the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone. Then some boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum **looking for Jesus.**"

There was a church that had morning and evening services on Sundays and the pastor would put his sermon titles on the sign out front. One Sunday this passage from John 6 was topic of his sermons in the morning and the evening. In the morning the church signed proclaimed, *"Jesus walks on the water."* Then when folks returned for the evening service the sign said, *"Looking for Jesus."*

That's kind of what we're doing, we're looking for Jesus amid all that's going on, we're looking for Christ in the crisis, seeking the message in the mess. So, let's look at John's story. The Gospel tell us when evening came, when it got dark, the ***"disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum."*** They left on their own without waiting for Jesus. **Trouble usually begins for followers of Christ when we start something**

without Jesus. Remember the disciples experienced an incredible day with Jesus – an amazing display of God’s power and compassion feeding 5,000 people with a few loaves of bread a couple fish - and their response is to leave without Jesus. Are you kidding me? This seems hard to believe; we think we wouldn’t do that. But have we?

Any time we embark on a new venture, on a step of faith without Jesus in our boat, we’re in for trouble. John says it was now dark **and Jesus had not yet come** – which means the good news is Jesus will come sometime, he just **hasn’t yet**. It’s bad enough to leave without Jesus, it’s worse to do so at night when it is more dangerous to be on the water as anyone who lives on Cape Cod knows – especially in the days before radar, sonar, and global positioning systems. And then the water started getting rough and a strong wind began blowing. Can you picture the scene? There’s no Jesus, no light, no calm, no peace. There’s darkness, a rough sea, strong wind, and growing fear.

Two of the primary fears many of us have in childhood are fear of the dark and fear of deep water. The disciples are rowing into deeper darkness and rougher water and perhaps they’re questioning the wisdom of not having Jesus with them in their boat. I imagine they’re anxious and afraid. Most of us would be. One time at a pool I watched the following scene unfold: a mother already in the water and her little girl wearing a floatation device, standing on the deck of the pool trying to jump in. The child approached the edge of the pool very slowly, fearfully. Tiny steps. She’d get right to the edge and start squatting down as if about to spring into the water. But instead she’d stand up, back up, and grimace. Her whole body saying, *“Do I really want to do this?”* Again, and again she was poised to jump and then stood up and stared suspiciously at the water. But all the while her mother was in the pool right in front of her. Her mother started reaching out her arms, saying, *“Come on, Honey, I’m right here, you’ll be fine.”* And finally, the little girl sprang into the air and came down in the pool with a splash. Her mother catching her and the two of them laughing with delight. The girl’s fear disappeared in the arms and presence of her mother, even in the water.

Many of us relive the pattern of that little girl when we face what is unfamiliar and frightening: like a global pandemic, or a new stage in life, moving to a new location, a world that seems so different than the one we grew up in, a financial crisis, an unforeseen challenge to live out our faith in ways and in situations that unnerve us. Perhaps the disciples were so unnerved by the experience of Jesus feeding 5,000 people that they just wanted to get back to familiar territory. Perhaps they're sensing in Jesus the power and presence of God and when God acts, it can be scary, even frightening. C. S. Lewis wrote, *"I wonder if people who asked for God to intervene in our world, really know what they are asking. Will they want to be there when God really does intervene?"*

One of my favorite movies of the 1990's was Robert Zemeckis' 1994 film *Forrest Gump* starring Tom Hanks as a slow witted but good-hearted man from Greenbow, Alabama. While serving in Vietnam, Gump saves the lives of several men including his superior officer Lt. Dan Taylor, who lost both his legs below the knees and who laments he should have died in the field with his men. Eventually Lt. Dan comes to Alabama to work with Forrest on his shrimp boat. Knowing nothing about shrimping, trying and failing, praying, going to church, and singing in the choir, Forrest trusts in God and believes things will work out while Lt. Dan continues to drown himself in a bottle of alcohol laced with self-pity. Finally, one day with an ominous sky, Lt. Dan asks Gump sarcastically, *"Where is this God of yours?"* Forrest says, *"Just then God showed up."* Riding out Hurricane Camille is a transforming experience for Lt. Dan and along with their subsequent success he is finally able to say to Forrest, *"I never thanked you for saving my life."* And though he never said so, Forrest believes he made his peace with God.

In this passage from John's Gospel, like in *Forrest Gump*, **Jesus also shows up unexpectedly on the water during a storm. John is telling us that when we seek to row the boat of our lives apart from the presence and guidance of God – we're likely to take ourselves into stormy seas. But thankfully in the storms of life, Jesus comes to us.** Sometimes in ways that seem miraculous, sometimes in places or ways or people that we don't expect – Jesus comes to us. In the midst of the darkness of our fear, uncertainty, grief,

disappointment, loneliness, despair, and need, through stormy waves of pride and disobedience, not even the strong winds of fear and doubt, can keep Jesus from showing up and saying, ***“It is I am (ego eimi); Do not be afraid.”***

Among John’s first audience those familiar with the Scriptures would have recognized that **“I Am” (ego eimi) was a form of God’s name**. When God appeared to Moses in the burning bush, God said, ***“I Am who I Am...say to the people of Israel, I Am has sent me to you”*** (Exodus 3:14). The ***“I am”*** here shows that **Jesus was the one in whom God’s name and identity were revealed**.

Jesus says, ***“Do not be afraid”*** which really isn’t a surprise because **often when God shows up in the Bible, God comes to take away someone’s fear**. That’s a message we need to hear today. When **Abram** was an old man and his hope of having a child as God promised was dimming, ***“The word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, ‘Do not be afraid Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great (Genesis 15:1).”***

God comes to Isaac in a time when he’s a semi-nomad **during a famine** and there’s enmity and contention between Isaac and other herders over wells of water. ***“The Lord appeared to Isaac and said, “I am the God of your father Abraham, do not be afraid, for I am with you (Genesis 26:24).”***

God comes to Gideon at a time when his people are being oppressed by enemies who are stealing their food. Amid economic hardship and oppression God comes to a man who’s the least in his family, whose family is the weakest in the tribe of Manasseh. There’s no way this guy can deliver Israel, well, there’s one way. The Lord said to Gideon, ***“I will be with you. Peace be to you; do not fear, you shall not die”*** (Judges 6:23).

The night of Jesus’ birth, the angel said to the shepherds (Luke 2:10), ***“Do not be afraid; for behold I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.”***

The Sunday morning after Jesus death on the cross, when the women come to the tomb, an angel says to them (Matthew 28:5), ***“Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified.”*** Then Jesus met them and take a wild guess what he said to them (Matthew 28:10), ***“Do not be afraid.”***

Think about the circumstances of these appearances –

When like Abram and Sarai we're giving up hope of having a future, God says,
Do not be afraid.

When like **Isaac and Rebekah**, we're hungry and thirsty and longing for direction but find only confusion, contention, and conflict, God says, **Do not be afraid.**

When like **Gideon** our enemies appear poised to swallow us alive and our own strength and resources seem pitifully weak and insufficient, God says,
Do not be afraid.

When like the shepherds we're in the darkness and we think God is concerned only about me, my family, my church, my town, my party, my nation – God sends an angel to say, **Do not be afraid**, I've got good news for all people.

God shows up when we are grieving like the women at Jesus' tomb on Easter morning and says, **Do not be afraid**, my death means life for you.

And for all of us living in a pandemic, Jesus himself comes to us when we're terrified and says, **"It is I Am; Do not be afraid."**

We're told that when the disciples heard Jesus say this, they immediately *"wanted to receive him into the boat"* (John 6:21). They wanted to be near Jesus. They receive Jesus as the one who comes in the name of God, the great I Am.

This gospel story reminds us that our circumstances are not the final word. It doesn't matter how far we may have rowed away from shore, how high the waves, how strong the winds, how dark the night, how hopeless circumstances may appear. Jesus comes when and where he is needed and wanted. **Unlike Matthew and Mark's account, John doesn't say Jesus stilled the storm. John says Jesus comes to us *in the storm* and rides out the storm with us until we reach our destination.**

We're in a storm that's likely to get worse before it gets better, so I want to encourage you to welcome Jesus into the boat of your life. We can trust Jesus through all the storms that life may bring. Being with Jesus doesn't mean we'll never experience any storms, fear or hardship, but John tells us Jesus will come to us and ride the storm out with us. Whatever your situation this morning, Jesus has a word for you:

Do not be afraid.

Prayer by St. Augustine:

God of our life, there are days when the burdens we carry chafe our shoulders & weigh us down; when the road seems dreary & endless, the skies grey & threatening; when our lives have no music in them, and our hearts are lonely, & our souls have lost their courage. Flood the path with light, run our eyes to where the skies are full of promise; tune our hearts to brave music; give us the sense of comradeship with heroes & saints of every age; & so quicken our spirits that we may be able to encourage the souls of all who journey with us on the road of life, to Your honor and glory. Amen

Blessing: In honor of Saint Patrick who we remember on Tuesday I leave you with this Irish blessing:

May the road rise up to meet you.

May the wind be always at your back.

May the sun shine warm upon your face;

the rains fall soft upon your fields and until we meet again,

may God hold you in the palm of His hand. Amen

Some Scriptures about Courage and Not Being Afraid

Psalm 27:1 *The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?*

1 Corinthians 16:13 *Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong.*

Ephesians 6:10 *Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.*

Psalm 18:2 *The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.*