



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA
Rev. Carolyn K. Hetrick
The 10th Sunday after Pentecost, August 9, 2020
Sermon Title: "God in our Storms"
Sermon Texts: 1 Kings 19:9-18 and Matthew 14:22-33

I've been listening to a lot of you: "Every day is chaos day." "I feel like I am just in survival mode." "No one listens to reason anymore." "The future looks so unsure." "All of the divisions and fighting and oppression are overwhelming me." One person said, "Pastor, you must wake up and hear the news and in the words of Dorothy Parker, think, 'What fresh hell is this?'"

If this sounds at all like your walk, we have good company today in our lessons.

It sure sums up how the prophet Elijah was feeling- he has tried to be faithful, it has taken everything but his life and that is sorely endangered. Feeling overcome and isolated, he goes and hides in a cave where sadly there is no cable TV or Netflix. God comes to him and asks, "What are you doing, Elijah?" And Elijah whines, and vents and laments while telling God how hard he has been trying. Twice. Second verse, same as the first. A little bit louder, a little bit worse. Maybe lately you have felt like Elijah.

Or maybe you feel like one of the disciples in the boat in the gospel. On the surface some might say they're overreacting, just being nervous in some choppy water. But let's not minimize their experience. Upon deeper reading, here's what has happened. They have been called by Jesus and they have begun to travel with him as he is healing and preaching that new vision, the kingdom- life changing good news! But it's exhausting trying to meet all the competing needs of people who are hungry, and sick and desperate. At the same time, despite hearing how changing the way we see the world will bring blessing and hope, this message is surprisingly not as universally embraced as one might hope. In fact, some folks get downright violent about it. And Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist has been killed.

Every day is a new chaos. They don't even get a chance to grieve properly, before suddenly thousands of people come to find Jesus and the feeding of "5,000 plus" miraculously occurs at supper time. Now it is night that same day, and these same disciples are told to sail across the lake. Grieving, processing all they have seen, wearied, and probably on auto pilot, maybe two days without real sleep. But they just can't catch a break.

They find themselves “with the wind against them” and fighting to keep going as there is no rest.

And now, late into this sleepless night, they have to be frazzled.

Maybe you can envision what that boat is like.

Now maybe it is even more clear than ever before why people who are with Jesus every day can’t even recognize he is there.

This isn’t their first storm, or their first storm with Jesus, but they are just tapped out and numb.

Perhaps these days, in some way, your life feels like those in the boat as we are between shores- not where we were, not sure when we will get to the other side. We may all be responding differently. Maybe some of us want to just find a cave, or a corner of the boat and hunker down. Maybe, a few of us want to figure out how to outrun it, or over-function. Maybe many of us, are just trying to stay in the boat and not fall out.

We don’t have to minimize how we are feeling. But Jesus comes to expand our faith.

Many sermons I have heard on this passage have either talked about “if you want to walk on water, you’ve got to get out of the boat,” like we have to calm the chaos alone. Could you imagine what would have happened if all the disciples got out of the boat at once and then started flailing?

Sometimes I have heard “you of little faith” and wondered if anyone ever hears “you of little faith” and gets a little irritated? Like only a bold and demonstrative move counts or my faith is insufficient.

While Peter is making a bold move, some may be frustrated, some may be praying, some may be sick to their stomachs. Some are still trying to steer. Some may be frozen. But everyone is in that boat and everyone is trying to survive. They are all terrified, settled in to a “now what” mindset and maybe even imagining this tumult could be the death of them. For each in their way, their faith IS small, and frankly, that is understandable. That’s why Jesus shows up.

Here is what I hear and see in this time. No matter how you identify with our lessons, I hope you see that God shows up, listens, lets us explore our faith and then chooses us to go on carrying God’s word. There will be both blessing and challenge ahead, but God’s story with the people will go on. For Elijah and for the disciples in the boat and for us. When God’s people encounter storms and chaos, know that God isn’t sending us chaos to test us, or reprimand us. God isn’t in the storm. God comes as the calm entering the chaos.

The stillness. God sees us in our noise and chaos and knows that our faith can be overwhelmed. We can feel small and surrounded by towering rocks in our wildernesses; or our faith can be made as tenuous as the surface of water. God wants to encourage us to take heart in knowing God is there. Imagine Jesus saying, "I know your faith feels small, let me help you with those doubts...Take my hand to calm your heart in this storm." Even when chaos feels like the constant in our world, the real constant that we can hold onto is that Jesus sees us, comes to us, reaches out to us, wants to lift us up, and restore us so he can lead us on and keep being "God with us." That storm in Matthew wasn't the first storm where the disciples cried out and Jesus brought calm. But this storm felt different. Just like our lives. Each storm asks us again to look for Jesus and trust. The good news is that God comes to be with us in the storms. God comes to be with us when we whine, when we shut down, when we over estimate ourselves, when we are weary and just can't see clearly. Our response doesn't need to be some demonstrative act. Our response is simply to remember we journey together with Jesus and Jesus is looking for us. And to point one another to him.

On Wednesday night, Jesus showed up as we gathered at Circleville Park. People were lined up and eager, patient and gracious, with one person saying she now saw clearly what it might be like for the crowds coming together for the Sermon on the Mount, with tears in her eyes. When we ran out of bulletins, we gathered and redistributed just like feeding the thousands. This happened as we stepped out of our world with most of us knowing storms we have been surviving, and storms we perhaps see on the horizon. But we left, faces aglow, hearts renewed, spirits filled up, at peace. Remembering we are in the boat together but most of all, we are in the boat with Jesus who will never let us go. And remember the last words Jesus told his disciples before he returned to the Father, he now says to you, "Remember I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

So friends, take heart.
Amen.