

What Next? Faith to Proceed
Matthew 14:22-33
1 Kings 19:9-18

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Well, here we are – the first Sunday of our new reality. I can't speak for any of you, but it feels a bit odd to me - in a way that I struggle to name. I mean, it's not like I haven't preached or led a congregation or filled an empty pulpit before. In fact, I have done all three...and have been doing some form of parish ministry for 20 years.

It's certainly not my first day at Tab. Actually, it is my 1,441st day, and I have, on many occasions, preached from this very pulpit. Nonetheless...I'd be lying if I said I don't feel as if my boat is rocking a little bit this morning. Not necessarily in a frightening way, but in a way that reminds me that today is different – for me, for us, for Tab.

For those who are visiting, or have been gone from worship for a while, today marks the start of a new journey in Tab's history. For the first time in 15 years, we are sailing toward a yet to be discovered future without the Rev. John Gable at the helm.

Thankfully, we don't anticipate a battering like what the disciples experienced against their boat; still, we will surely encounter our own winds and waves along the way. Moreso, it's likely that we will experience some of the same emotions and fears that the disciples felt as they waited on those rough seas for whatever would come next.

Granted, the circumstances that landed them in the turbulent sea are significantly more tragic than a pastoral transition. Whereas we have just said **good-bye** to our pastor John, they had just witnessed the senseless beheading of their John, the Baptist. The loss was significant for all of them, including Jesus, and their grief must have been overwhelming. Not to mention the fear. And anxiousness. And confusion. And wondering, "what now"? "Where do we go from here?"

In some ways, the winds and waves beating against the boat were symbolic of the turmoil playing out in their own hearts, minds, and spirits as they processed the chaos and disturbance starting to emerge in the community - which would eventually be directed toward Jesus (and them). Although the situation was different, we can still relate.

We all have our own winds and waves that pound us, don't we? Our own personal tragedies, burdens, and life-altering events...the things that blur our perspective and vision...that dull our hope and distract us into the dark abyss...things that we fret over...worry about...and suffer under.

Great and small, things show up in our lives that cause us to huddle in fear...to not be able to see the future in front of us, and at times, to question if God is truly near.

Most of us have lived through something that makes us want to cry out like the psalmist, “How long, O Lord, how long?” How long until the seas are calm, the winds are stilled, and peace is restored?

How long must we wait until the test results are in, until the illness is cured, til this brokenness healed? How long will this grief and loneliness last? How long will my child suffer? How long will it take to ease this burden, pay off this debt, find a better job? How long until we have a new pastor? How long, O Lord, how long?

It’s human nature to want to get through the waves and winds of life as quickly as possible. It’s our tendency to want to avoid chaos and to seek certainty rather than remain in the “in between” even for a short while.

Ironically, though, the creation of anything wonderful, beautiful, and new, **always** begins with a little unformed chaos. Ask any artist. Or, in keeping with the boating image, if you want to sail, you gotta have **some** wind. As one who typically avoids risk at all cost, yet thrives on envisioning new things, I’ve come to realize that I can never know the joy of bringing a new thing into existence, without taking some risk.

It’s a paradox of sort. The things we **fear** most are often also **necessary** in order to eventually have those things we **want** most.

Winds and waves, even storms, are a fact of life. The good news is we need never to ride them out alone. God is always near. Christ always comes to us. And, ideally, our community will also be there to support us...at least to the imperfect extent humans can offer.

Even when we don’t have clarity, even when God comes to us in very unexpected ways, God is present in all our storms...available to calm our fears...ready to save us from that which troubles us.

It doesn’t necessarily mean God will remove us from the winds and waves of life. Or remove them from our life. I mean, in this telling of the story, Jesus doesn’t rebuke the winds and calm the waves. He doesn’t silence the storm. Instead, he tells the disciples: “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

Do not be afraid. Do **not** be afraid. Take heart, **it is I**; do not be afraid.

Whatever waves and winds are battering our lives personally or subtly rocking the boat of this congregation right now, Jesus is still speaking: “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

God’s got us...whether we stay in the boat, try to hide in a cave, step out in faith or run toward Jesus in fear. God’s got us. Yep. You heard, me, whether we move in faith or fear.

I mean, we always assume that Peter got out of the boat as an act of faith...but I wonder if it could just as well have been **fear** that motivated him? Think about it, perhaps Peter impulsively decided it was better to try to walk on the water than to remain in that bouncing boat. It wouldn't be totally out of character for him. Nor would he be the only person who has been motivated by fear, rather than trust, when seeking out Jesus in a crisis.

I think that's why I have a soft spot for Peter...he's so real. He's so human.

According to Jesus, Peter had little faith...also very human and relatable. Thankfully though, if we take Jesus' teachings about faith to heart, a little faith is enough. Faith the size of a mustard seed moves mountains. With a little faith, nothing is impossible.

It makes one wonder if it was really Peter's faith that Jesus was questioning when he said: "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" Perhaps instead, Jesus was gently giving Peter the very love and compassion and comfort he needed when the things Peter feared most...the winds and waves...began to, once again, nag at him...compelling him to take notice.

So, so relatable....is it not? Even as our faith is carrying us forward, there will be moments when fear and doubts and negative thoughts creep in...and without warning we will begin to sink. That's true for our individual lives...and in congregations.

I don't sense that Jesus' question of Peter is a scolding. Perhaps there was a bit of disappointment in his tone, but I hear compassion and love. I hear the gospel. I hear grace! I think Jesus is genuinely asking Peter to share his doubts. "Tell me, Peter, what caused the doubt?" It encourages Peter to tell of his fears...to voice the thoughts that entered his mind and caused him to sink into the dark scary waters. After all, naming these winds and waves of our lives, telling them to Jesus, takes away their power...and restores our hope and faith.

As Tab moves forward in faith into this time of transition, it will behoove us to name the winds and waves as they arise for our congregation as well. To do so will lessen their ability to "sink this ship" (if you will) or to steer us off God's course for our future.

Friends, whether fear or faith or a little of both motivates us to move toward Jesus in the storms and scary uncertainties of life, we can be assured that, when – not if, but when - we get in trouble...and WE ARE HUMANS, our anxious thoughts will eventually get us into trouble...we do not have to sink and drown. We only need to cry out for help, and we will be rescued.

When the battering from the storms is too great, we only need to cry out for help. When we are scared, overwhelmed, uncertain, desperate, feeling alone and hopeless, as if we are sinking...we only need to cry out, Lord, help me. Have mercy on me. Save me. OR...maybe we just groan. Many of us know this wordless cry all too well.

We've also experienced God's response to our cry...Christ's hand there grabbing ours...lifting us up...refocusing us on what faith can do...saving us from drowning in our own despair...giving a moment of peace and calm. We've felt God's Spirit gently guiding us back to the boat...back into the fold of our loving family, caring friends and faithful community...where we can then ride out the storm together.

This is God's promise to all God's people: When God's people step out...God is present. When God's people cry out...God responds.

As Tab steps in faith, into this uncertain future, God is already present with us. And, as we collectively and corporately cry out for his guidance and help, God will hear and respond.

Let me clarify for a moment. To me, "collectively" means that we are all calling out to God in our individual prayers, but with the same desire in our hearts. Our unique prayers for Tab are collected, if you will, before God. Whereas corporately, to me, means that we pray together...as a voice. Same desires, same prayers, at the same time.

I encourage everyone to be praying for God's will and guidance in this transition. Pray for the next pastor whom God is preparing...for our unity...and for our future. And, if you're interested in joining in a corporate crying out to God...for the world...for Christ's church...and for Tab as we proceed toward the future, I would commend to you the Tuesday evening prayer service in McKee Chapel each week at 6pm.

Currently there is a small but mighty group of Tab folks who are stepping out in faith, praying for Tab, seeking God's leading and asking God to respond to our needs, desires, and fears. Imagine what might happen if the 5 or 6 voices currently crying out to God on our behalf was magnified 2-fold, 5-fold, 10-fold!?!

Talk about the power to rebuke storms and calm the seas in Jesus' name.

When God's people cry out...God responds.

When God heard the cry of the suffering slaves in Egypt, he sent Moses to bring them out of slavery.

When Moses cried out in weakness because of his speech impediment, God provided Aaron to do the talking.

In fact, every time Moses cried out, God heard and responded with help: plagues against Pharaoh, parting waters of the red sea, manna for food in the wilderness...just to name a few!

When Elijah cried out from fear and burnout, God provided food, then rest and eventually the truth-telling perspective-shift we heard in the first reading today.

When King Jehoshaphat pleaded in prayer for God's help against the threat of the vast armies God sent a simple response: Do not be afraid or discouraged. the battle is not yours; it is God's. **Best answer ever.** The battle is not yours. It. Is. God's!

When the woman in the crowd who had been bleeding for years cried out...not with words, but with that desperate gesture of grabbing Jesus' garment, Jesus responded with physical healing, which resulted in renewed hope and restoration to her community.

When Paul cried out from prison, God did not always provide physical freedom; instead, he released Paul from his misery and filled him with inexplicable joy and peace. Now, there was the one earthquake which not only opened the gates to freedom, but also gave Paul and Silas the opportunity to witness to the jailer – who was eventually baptized.

Folks, this is the overarching narrative of our faith. God responds to the cries of his people and WE...you, me, all of us...are part that narrative. We have our own stories, too.

In fact, I invite you to take a moment today to remember a time when you have cried out to God...perhaps as recently as this morning...and remember God's faithfulness to you.

When God's people step out, God is present. When God's people cry out, God responds.

May it be so for each of us.

May it be so for the church universal and the congregation we call Tab.

Let us pray.