*‘In the Storms and the Silence, I AM is with You”*Based on Matthew 14:22-33 and 1 Kings 19:9-12
Delivered on Sunday, August 9, 2020, Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor

Each of today’s texts is about the moments after a great miracle of God’s presence and power. For Elijah, it comes after a showdown with the false prophets of Israel’s idolatrous King Ahab. In the showdown, these prophets of Baal and Elijah each prepared a sacrifice. Then each one prayed for their god to bring the fire to consume them. After a whole day of prayer to the false god Baal, there was no fire. Elijah even joked in the Hebrew that maybe their god was off going to the bathroom.

Elijah then had the people douse his offering with their water, a scarce commodity since Israel was in a 3-year drought. But nonetheless the God of Israel provided fire, and then ended the drought with rain. In the face of this proof of God, the idolatrous king and queen, ordered that Elijah, be killed.

For the Apostles, they are sent out into the boat after the miracle of the loaves and fish. Indeed, as we talked about last week, Jesus had just taken what little the people had, and turned it into enough food to feed 5,000 men, plus women and children. Now, the Apostles were off to the other side of the Sea of Galilee without Jesus when a headwind came against their boat and a storm came in. Here they are now, in the middle of the night against a storm, that even these experienced fishermen can’t handle, as their boat is tossed to and fro on the sea.

In both of these circumstances, we see those who have the most reason to trust God. After all, each had been shown what we might consider definitive proof of God. We would like to think that if we were at the miracle of the 5,000 we would never doubt. If we saw what Elijah did, we would never doubt. But they had seen these things, and then found themselves unsure of whether God really was with them.

Yes, even after God brought a great miracle and ended the drought, the prophet Elijah wondered if he was the only believer, then asked, ‘Where is God?’ After Jesus had just stretched five loaves and two fish to feed maybe 10,000 people, the apostles went away on a boat into a storm, and they too likely wondered, ‘Are we alone out here? Where is Jesus? Where is God?’ Even though they had just seen great miracles, which revealed both God’s power and presence, they wondered if they were alone.

Elijah was afraid, questioning whether God would save him, so he climbed up the mountain. He thought that he was the last of God’s faithful, the only one who could reach God. This mountain was where Moses is said to have received the 10 commandments. Elijah went looking for God – the very same God who had just been with him on the ground. Yes, he thought he needed to climb higher to reach that same God.

Do you ever feel like Elijah, wondering if you are alone? Do you wonder if anyone believes in God as you do? Do you think you need to climb mountains to know God? Or, do you ever feel like the Apostles, like you are stranded? Do you wonder if the skills you have are enough to save you? Do you question if Jesus is gone, if He remembers you? Do you ask, where is God in my struggle? Are you ever afraid?

Two weeks ago, I spoke to you about lament, and last week, we talked about our feelings. I have been preaching from the lectionary all this year, and it always amazes me. When I had the sense that there was growing frustration amid this shutdown, there was Paul’s message in Romans 8 to comfort us in our lament, our prayers of frustration over what God allows to happen, including the unexpected death of our friend Isaac Umoren, a Christ-centered elder, whom we laid to rest yesterday.

Then last week, the feeding of the 5,000 spoke to us about how Jesus addressed his feelings, and how we should follow his lead in taking the time to grieve what we have lost, even if what we are grieving is the uncontrollable change in the world around us. And so this week, seemed to pair up perfectly with Tropical Storm Isaias, and my plan was to address you with Isaias and use it to show how in the storms of life, God may call us out of the boat to share in God’s work, just as Jesus called Peter out into the water with him, and how Jesus saved Peter even when he doubted.

Then on Wednesday, another dear friend and brother in Christ, Russ Adkisson died. Yes, our friend Russ died unexpectedly while working in the cemetery at the church. He was cleaning up many of the branches Hurricane Isaias had knocked down. A gentle giant, he was doing what he loved to do, help out at the church. I had seen him earlier in the morning working, as he often did. Little did I know, that it would be the last time I’d see him alive.

Indeed, the texts for today are appropriate for us, because we are indeed still in a storm. We are indeed in a time of uncertainty, when it can seem like the world is against us. Here we are still in the uncertainty of COVID-19 when there is no right answer, and here we are to see injustice in our systems, and volatility it causes in our society. Here we are when friends like Kris and Priscilla, two active and vibrant members of our community, have moved away, to join their children in California and Hawaii, leaving big holes in our hearts and our ministries. Here we are with so many on our prayer lists, and so many more battling loneliness. Here we are laying to rest our friend, saying goodbye to Isaac.

This is the storm we were already in when the waves crashed against our boat again with Russ. It’s enough to make us question, is this boat strong enough to survive these waves? Like the apostles, we have experience, but can we weather much more to grieve? There are some who might look at all of this and try to find some message for us of what we need to do. Perhaps that there is something we need to do, an act of repentance. Some might point us to a mountain we must climb in order to reach God, in order to get back in the good graces of the God Almighty.

But I wonder, if once we achieved such a thing by our own actions, how would God receive it? What would God say to us? Perhaps, the Lord would say as was said to Elijah, “What are you doing here?”

You see, I’m all for repentance and I preach about it almost every single week in some way, but repentance is not what we do to earn God’s favor, to get back in good with God. When we are in the storms of life, when we question where God is in all of it? Our tendency is to turn toward our doubts and turn away from God. Repentance is not a grand gesture to get God’s attention, but merely turning around and seeing God with you in all things, for even when you think God only comes in big ways, like great winds, earthquakes or fires, the Lord is there even in sheer silence, or as other translations put it – the still small voice – even when we think he is gone.

If we want to know where God is, we need only to look back and see first where God has been. You have seen the presence of God in this church for many, many years. This is a congregation that has been proclaiming the good news for 160 years, and in every storm, God has remained with you to bring you here today. God was at work in both Russ and Isaac, through their service, through their gentle and welcoming ways, in their love. And God is at work in our sisters who have gone West, and we have sent them like missionaries, to make an impact in their new homes.

Indeed, God is and has always been with us.

Our grief and our loss are both very real, and we must not just try to bottle them up and forget, or else what we risk doing is forgetting where we have seen God in what we have lost. We must resist the temptations of this world to say that God has left us, because the God of our Christian faith did not shy away from this world, but entered into this broken creation to live like you and me. Indeed, the God who made all things became part of creation.

In Jesus, the One True God, shared in our humanity. Yes, this mystery is that the fullness of God also knows what it is like to be fully human. Jesus grieved loss, knew what it was like to be betrayed, to be an outcast, and Jesus endured the suffering, even the lamented the feeling of being abandoned. But on that night when the Apostles were facing the chaos of the sea, He walked out to them on the water to reach them, before they had called for him, and said to them, “Be bold. I am. Do not be afraid.”

Yes, whatever the translation, be of good cheer, take courage, take heart, is what Jesus said to them as the waves crashed. “It is I” but literally in the Greek, “I Am.” “Do not be afraid.” When they saw him as a ghost, an apparition, something that was not real on the water, Jesus identified himself, and did so using the name of God, the meaning of YHWH, which is in Hebrew, “I am who I am,” and in Greek, is shortened to “I Am.” Jesus shows the disciples who He truly is as God with them in the storm, and I love how Peter repents in that moment – He goes to Jesus.

Indeed, repentance is not merely turning from sin, as though this is an achievement of yours of some kind, but it is turning from this world & turning to God. Peter steps out of his comfort zone, recognizing that God is with him, and Peter also walks out on the water. Now much is made of his doubt, and the fact that he sinks, but this is our reality. We step out of the boat boldly as Christians, ready to walk on the water with our God, but the world reminds us of the risk we are taking and we see the waves around us.

It is easy to lose sight of the God who walked on the water with Peter, living as a human being just like you and me, to die for our sins, only to rise again to new life and share that life – God’s life – with us, by filling the faithful with the Holy Spirit, which pours out God’s love in our hearts, and calls us to love God and our neighbors, without fear because God is with us, and promises us salvation, now and forever.

But when we lose sight, we can again do as Peter did and cry out for help, an act of true repentance, of true faith, calling out to the Lord in our times of need. In this storm, in whatever storm you face, be bold indeed and of good cheer, not by ignoring the challenges of this life as if they aren’t there, but by facing all of life’s pain and uncertainty, bringing it to God, and sharing the burden with the Lord who loves you, and shared in your human experience to know you, not just as your God but as your brother.

Friends, this has perhaps been the hardest week for me as your pastor in the past 2 years. Last week, was my two year anniversary of my ordination. So, this message is as much my preaching to myself as it is preaching to you. In this storm, in this moment, when we grieve, and our frustrations may be high, we must remember to be bold, bringing our concerns and fears to God, and we must remember who Jesus is – our God and our brother – who bound His humanity with ours, to be human with us, and gives us the Holy Spirit to pour love in our hearts, and trust by faith that God will calm the storm. Amen

Word Search Puzzle

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words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom

W I N D T H E M H A D C U C D C T B F C

I M M E D I A T E L Y R P O O A H E A R

W H E N I N T O A W L O F M U U E G I I

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Words in the puzzle are printed in ***bold italics.***

(***Matthew*** 14:22-33 NRSV) ***Immediately*** he ***made*** the ***disciples*** ***get*** ***into*** the ***boat*** and go on ***ahead***

 to the ***other*** ***side***, ***while*** he ***dismissed*** the crowds. And ***after*** he ***had*** dismissed the ***crowds***, he ***went*** up the ***mountain*** by ***himself*** to ***pray***. When ***evening*** came, he was ***there*** ***alone***, but by ***this*** ***time*** the boat, ***battered*** by the ***waves***, ***was*** ***far*** ***from*** the ***land***, ***for*** the ***wind*** was ***against*** them. And ***early*** in the ***morning*** he came ***walking*** toward ***them*** on the sea. But ***when*** the disciples ***saw*** him walking on the ***sea***, they were ***terrified***, saying, "It is a ***ghost***!" And they ***cried*** out in ***fear***. But immediately Jesus ***spoke*** to them and said, "***Take*** ***heart***, it is I; do not be ***afraid***." Peter ***answered*** him, "***Lord***, if it is you, ***command*** me to ***come*** to ***you*** on the ***water***." He ***said***, "Come." So ***Peter*** ***got*** out of the boat, ***started*** walking on the water, and came ***toward*** Jesus. ***But*** when he ***noticed*** the ***strong*** wind, he ***became*** ***frightened***, and ***beginning*** to ***sink***, he cried ***out***, "Lord, ***save*** me!" ***Jesus*** immediately ***reached*** out his ***hand*** and ***caught*** him, ***saying*** to him, "You of ***little*** ***faith***, ***why*** ***did*** you ***doubt***?" When ***they*** got into the boat, the wind ***ceased***. And ***those*** in the boat ***worshiped*** him, saying, "***Truly*** you ***are*** the ***Son*** of ***God***."