

Troubled Waters
La Verne Church of the Brethren
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Isaiah 43:2a, Matthew 14:23-31

Message:

Have you ever been out on the open sea on a boat during a storm? I can't say that I have ever experienced bad weather on the ocean, but I have experienced a personal storm. When I was young I went whale watching with my neighborhood friend's family. This was a yearly expedition for them, but for me it would be my first time on the ocean. I remember the captain speaking to the passengers over a PA system. He was giving what were probably standard instructions which included what to do if you felt sea sick. Specifically, he asked that we not vomit over the edge of the boat due to high winds that would more than likely mean the contents of our stomach would end up on the deck; or worse, back in our face. I remember getting really worked up about this announcement. I worried... just how bad is this going to get? I started scanning my surroundings for a bathroom where I could get sick if need be. There were only two singles. One for men and one for women. Two bathrooms for a boat full of people who, in my imagination, would soon be stumbling around groaning and puking all over each other. We hadn't even left the harbor and I was already beginning to feel nauseous! So, I found a seat in the lower cabin with the closest proximity to the bathroom and I stayed put. I had no intention of giving up my seat, just in case I needed it. As soon as we got a few miles out of the harbor the boat started straining against the wind and the waters got really choppy. At first the boat just rocked back and forth a little. But, then it began to pitch upward and then slam back down, upward and slam back down - over and over again. As we got further and further from the shore the more convinced I became that we were going to flip over backwards. I was absolutely certain this 3-hour tour was going to end badly. Once we were in a prime whale watching location, the boat stopped and the captain returned to the PA to direct our attention to the horizon, where he spotted some whales heading our direction. This did not provide comfort. The boat was still rocking, albeit more gently but now whales were heading our direction, on a collision course with our boat - or so my fearful thoughts told me. I could not understand why we weren't getting the heck out of there. I did all this overthinking with the finesse of a 7-year old who wanted her Mommy but didn't want to admit how scared she was in front of her friend's Mom. So, while people were on the upper deck, "oohing" and "ahhing" over the glory and wonder of witnessing a humpback whale breaching the waters, I told a story about being sick the night before - "probably the flu", I said, and I stayed put. I never got to see a whale that day and neither did my friend's mother because she never left my side, bless her! But, the point of this story is that I lost my battle with fear. I was terrified! And once we were back on dry land, if my friend's Mom had said to me, "You have little faith. Why did you doubt we would make it back safely?", I am quite certain I would have puked on her.

So, just to be clear? This is not a sermon about a TEST of our faith. And I don't think that is what was going on between Jesus and Peter either.

The Matthew scripture that Shirley read to us is often used to preach to people about being more faithful or having courage when "stepping out" in faith. It goes something like this, "Welp, you took your eyes off of Jesus and look what happened!" But to interpret it that way is to miss the real danger Peter was in and the justifiable fear he was experiencing. Before he appears on the water, Jesus sent the disciples ahead by boat to the other side of the sea, while he went up on the mountain alone to pray. By evening, the boat was far from shore and being battered by wind and waves. The boat and the disciples within it were experiencing severe distress. But, that still doesn't quite capture the perilous sense of danger Peter and the others disciples were experiencing. They would have been very familiar with the creation story in Genesis that described "chaotic waters" as representing evil and danger, something God had to tame in order for creation to flourish. In that same vane, the story of Noah and the flood that destroyed an entire population would have been a communal memory. So for them the sea is threatening, full of dangerous creatures. It is unruly, powerful, and it can destroy you. Danger and fear permeate the narrative of this text and in the midst of that chaos, Jesus appears and extends his hand to Peter. To reduce it down to a lesson about how Peter would have succeeded if only he had a bit more faith, or if only he hadn't succumbed to a moment of doubt is an unsettling conclusion for followers in any century. Peter was clear about the risks of climbing out of that boat and he did it anyway, in spite of his fears. He faithfully climbed out, and walked on the water toward Jesus. But when he looked down at the waves churning beneath his feet, he lost his nerve and started to sink. Peter's great failing is not that he lacked faith but that he lost focus and succumbed to fear.

Anne Lamott, says this about faith and fear:

"I have a lot of faith. But I am also afraid a lot, and have no real certainty about anything. I remembered something Father Tom had told me--that the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Certainty is missing the point entirely. Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns." Fear exists, it just cannot be the focus and neither is certainty.

I just recently watched a documentary on Harriet Tubman. Now here is a woman who knows something about faith and fear. Tubman risked greatly to gain freedom from slavery. She was married at the time she decided to escape and not only did her husband refuse to go with her, he threatened to turn her in. He was a free man on paper, but he was afraid and he wanted to make her be afraid too. Tubman never lost focus. She was not unclear about the risks of running, "If I die, I die" but she refused to stay enslaved by man or fear. She faced real danger; traveling alone by night, always with the consequences of being caught in the forefront of her mind. But Tubman was a deeply faithful woman. She felt so guided and protected by God that she was compelled to act even when she was afraid, even when the obstacles seemed insurmountable. Once she made it to freedom on the underground railroad she committed to doing as much good with her life as she could and she herself became a conductor. Tubman

would return to the south, 19 times to liberate her family members and hundreds of other slaves. Every time she returned to rescue another group, she feared for her own safety as well as the safety of the travelers with her. Strength, courage, determination, and faith in God enabled her to face the constant dangers. In 1865, she said, "I prayed to God to make me strong and able to fight, and that's what I've always prayed for ever since." She knew that every step forward put the nightmare of slavery behind those she helped. To keep their spirits up Tubman sang songs while operating her rescue missions. Through singing she also communicated instructions regarding how to travel on the underground railroad and to signal whether it was safe to come out or not. She advised escaping slaves to get off the trail and into the water. The more troubled the water, the harder it would be for the dogs to track them, and the greater their chance of making it to freedom. Tubman had the courage to step into the water and she encouraged others to do the same.

Fear kept me from finding my sea legs and from witnessing the majesty of the natural world when I was 7-years old. When fear rules, it keeps us from seeing the whale, or shooting the rapids, or running toward the water to seek freedom. It takes courage and understanding to believe that stepping into troubled waters is where we need to be, where we demand another ending, where we meet Jesus.

Friends, we are in the midst of ever shifting, sudden and frequent storms. We are being battered by waves of outrage and fear.

We are outraged at what this pandemic has revealed about systemic health and social inequities. We fear for the wellbeing of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged among us.

- We are outraged when we see sustained evidence of racial injustice. We fear for the lives of people of color.
- We are outraged by a hyper-partisan culture that fosters anger and mistrust. We fear the other that used to be our brother.
- We are outraged by the devastating fires and floods we are witnessing daily. We fear we have done irreparable damage to Mother Earth.

Our boat and our spirits are dangerously battered and it feels like we are sinking! We are crying out, "Lord save us". We're not going to find Jesus in the boat. The troubled waters is where we need to be. It's where we demand another ending, and it's where we meet Jesus.

Troubled waters are the pathway to freedom. And like baptismal waters, when we find the courage to enter we rise and walk in newness of life.

May we find the courage to join Jesus in troubled waters.
Amen