

1 Kings 19:9-18; Matthew 14:22-33
August 9, 2020
Emmanuel Episcopal Church

What a week to be reading scripture passages about storms. We saw Hurricane Isaias rip through this week, leaving death and destruction in its wake. All of the technology we have harnessed and we still cannot control the weather. We still, like our ancient family, are terrified by storms. There are times when I enjoy a good storm. I tell you, when I don't like storms: when I have to drive in them. I work in Harrisonburg and live in Staunton. One day this week, after I had been at work for about 10 hours, since 5 am, a storm hit right when I was trying to go home. I should have stayed at work until the storm passed but I didn't have it in me; I was tired and I just wanted to take off the mask I wear all day and go home. So I got on Interstate 81 to drive home. The rain was pouring in sheets. Cars and trucks were going 40 miles an hour, with hazard lights blinking. Lightening was striking. At one point, my car hit a deep stretch of standing water and hydroplaned a bit, losing control. At that moment, I didn't like storms at all. At that moment, I was caught in fear; out of control, knowing that a force much more powerful than I was had me in its grip. I was completely vulnerable to the storm.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus has just fed thousands of people after he preached to them and healed people all day long. It was a very long day. After the food, Jesus puts his disciples in the boat and sends them sailing on the Sea of Galilee while he heads up the mountain alone to pray. After a long day, the disciples spend the entire night on the water fighting the wind and the waves. It sounds exhausting. Several of the disciples were fishermen, so they would have been both accustomed to this work and also acutely aware of the real dangers of the sea.

After a long night, Jesus comes walking to them on the water. And seeing this, the disciples are afraid. The storm did not scare them. But this, what they perceive as a ghost in the early morning hours, terrifies them. Terrified. Fear. Frightened. All three words used in this story. Immediately, Jesus speaks to them to calm their fear. "It is I. Do not be afraid." One of the most common refrains through the entire Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. Do not be afraid. God says it. Angels say it. Jesus says it. Do not be afraid.

Matthew is the only gospel that tells us this version, where Peter asks Jesus to come to him on the water. Jesus calls Peter and Peter gets out of the boat, and starts walking on the water toward Jesus. At first, he is fine. But when he notices the strong wind, he becomes frightened and starts to sink. He cries out, Lord save me! Jesus immediately reaches out his hand and catches Peter. He must have been very close to do this.

Let's be real for a second: it would have been terrifying to step out of that boat onto the water. Peter is not one of my favorites of the Bible. But I will give it to him, it took a lot of courage to get out of that boat, after a long night of battling the wind and waves. Don't forget: Peter was a fisherman. He knew all the stories about the sea; the frightening tales of what lives under the

water. And as a person who knew all of the risk, all of the danger, he was the only disciple on that boat that stepped out to Jesus.

This week, I reflected in particular about how often those who stay safely in the boat criticize those who have stepped out, when they become afraid and start to sink. Peter is easy to criticize. He should have trusted Jesus. He should have kept his focus on Jesus. He should not have been distracted. He should have reached out his hand. Shoulda, shoulda, shoulda. It's easy to criticize from the safety of the boat.

Followers of Jesus get in trouble when we become content with our safe and comfortable status on the boat. When we care more about people liking us than about taking kingdom risks or speaking uncomfortable truth. When we value the safety of the status quo and the ignorance of privilege. We are complicit in both our silence and our lack of action alongside the oppressed, persecuted, terrorized. And a word of caution: watch out when they use words like "peace" and "unity" to keep the status quo in place, undisturbed. When keeping the peace or calling for unity means keeping things the way they always have been, that is a red flag.

Don't rock the boat, we say. We tell our children: be good. Behave. Be polite. Jesus would never say that. Jesus practically/basically sets up camp in the eye of the storm. There's always a storm around him. He is constantly the epicenter of conflict. He is unapologetically loud, outspoken and active: acting FOR the outcast, the forgotten, the oppressed, the impoverished. His teaching, his parables, and his actions stir things up and create an uproar because they create God's kingdom of love and justice here and now, in a world that is more concerned with unity and order, propriety and privilege. Jesus is concerned with making things right, not easy or comfortable. He is focused on freedom and life abundant, for all. The apostles carry this on after his resurrection and ascension, in the power of Pentecost. They are called "those persons who are turning the world upside down." They constantly find themselves in the eye of the storm because they challenge all things and systems that kill, steal and destroy: extortion, slavery, illness poverty, exclusion.

Because Jesus has come to bring life, he never shies away from the forces of death, destruction, oppression, injustice. His presence calls the question, creates the crisis. His teaching, actions, and very life bring the existing tension to the surface. Martin Luther King Jr. talked about this in his letter from the Birmingham City Jail. Bringing tension to the surface so that it can be exposed and dealt with. The status quo wants to be nice and polite. But black people are being shot, not even just in the street; in their own homes. Breonna Taylor. Black children are being handcuffed and laid down on hot pavement. Brown children are being held in cages. Sitting back in the boat is not an option for those who follow Jesus. The systems and storms that steal, kill and destroy must be confronted by the life of Jesus, by the God of deliverance and exodus. It's what Jesus did. It's what Jesus calls his followers to do.

Those of us who have laid down our nets to follow Jesus boat are called to step out of comfort, complacency and privilege in the boat. It may seem foolish to choose the storm, but doesn't the

scripture tell us that God has chosen what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; what is weak in the world to shame the strong; what is low and despised in the world (1 Cor 1:27-28). The I AM who makes a way in the sea will be with us. Do not be afraid.

It will require that we show up, listen up, speak up, and act up. Two weeks ago, I told you about my friend and mentor Rev. Dr. Vance P. Ross. In his Easter Sunday sermon, he talked about the call for us to show up, listen up, and speak up. Later, I believe he also added “act up.” John Lewis might say, get into some good trouble.

Local siblings, we show up for the Building Bridges gatherings as we work together in our community to actively dismantle racism and white supremacy. Here in our community. We show up, even when we are tired. We listen up, to the leaders who know firsthand the experience and traumas of systemic racism and whose stories we believe. We speak up, when the people around us speak words of racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, white supremacy. We speak up and step into the storm, knowing that family members and people we have known a long time will be offended and in the face of the people who have taught us to be polite and look the other way. We act up. My colleague Rev. Hannah Bonner says that we put our bodies in the way. We have seen those images from Portland, of the wall of moms, putting their bodies in the way.

All this time, we keep our eyes on Jesus. The one who knows the storm intimately. The one who tells us not to be afraid. The one who is so close he can reach out his hand and lift us up if we fall. The one who calls us to follow him and to be part, right now, of this new Kingdom that turns the world upside down.