

*Sunday Worship
A Service for Your Use at Home
St Paul United Church of Christ
5312 Old Blue Rock Road
Cincinnati, Ohio 45247
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Because of the pandemic caused by the corona virus, our congregation, along with many others, has decided that we must forego gathered worship services at this time. Each Sunday until we gather again, we will provide worship materials that members and friends can use in our homes in the knowledge that we are not alone, but are celebrating these holy days with our friends and neighbors in the faith. As you use this worship service, I hope you will pause and remember the tune to a familiar hymn as you read the words, and pray as partners in the fellowship of Christ.

If you have access to a computer or cell phone, you may want to open the video recording of the Scripture and Sermon provided by the pastor on both our church website and the message sent to all who are on our email list.

Today is the eleventh Sunday after Pentecost. Welcome to our worship. Today we will listen again to the well-known story of Jesus walking on the water, but we'll look at it from the slightly different perspective: What about those times when Jesus invites us to walk on the water with him?

As we begin our worship today, read the words and hum the tune, if you remember it, to a hymn that reflects the Gospel story written by Cecil F Alexander to the music by William H Jude:

***Jesus calls us o'er the tumult of our life's wild, restless sea.
Day by day his sweet voice soundeth, saying "Christian, follow me."***

***Jesus calls us from the worship of the vain world's golden store,
From each idol that would keep us, saying "Christian, love me more."***

***In our joys and in our sorrows, days of toil and hours of ease,
Still he calls in cares and pleasures, "Christian, love me more than these."***

***Jesus calls us – by thy mercies, Savior, may we hear thy call,
Give our hearts to thine obedience, serve and love thee best of all.***

Our reading from the Psalms for this morning is a portion of Psalm 85, verses 8-13:

Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for you will speak peace to your people, to your faithful, to those who turn to you in their hearts.

Surely your salvation is at hand for those who fear you, that your glory may dwell in our land.

Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky.

The Lord will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase.

Righteousness will go before the Holy One, and will make a path for the steps of God.

Our Gospel lesson today is Matthew 14:22-33

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 worshipped him, saying, "Truly you are the son of God."

The Sermon:

(Note: For those who want to see and hear a video of the complete sermon you can find it on our church website or open the message that you will receive if you have given us your email address.)

Our Gospel story today is written in three parts. The first part of the story is when Jesus sent the disciples ahead of him while he took some time by himself to pray. There was a reason for this. In the verses before this story begins, we learn that Jesus had received some sad and disappointing news: his friend and colleague in prophetic ministry, John, who was known for baptizing his followers in the Jordan River and for making dangerous comments critical of the Judean king had been beheaded by King Herod, and Jesus wanted to be alone to mourn his death. But, as you may remember, his plan was thwarted by a large crowd of people who followed him to his place of retreat and stayed to hear his teachings until it became so late in the day that they needed to be fed. So Jesus fed them with a few loaves and fish that were miraculously multiplied as the people shared them with glad and generous hearts. Finally they went home, but Jesus had not yet had the time he needed to be alone and to pray, so he sent the disciples on ahead of him in a boat to cross the Sea of Galilee. They are headed to the eastern shore, a city called Gennesaret that is inhabited by gentiles, that is, people who are not Jewish. In mentioning this, Matthew is following the itinerary of Jesus' journeys described by Mark, the author of the earliest Gospel, who made a point of telling his readers whenever Jesus crossed the Sea, because whenever he did this he was moving from the home territory of Israel to a foreign community with different customs, traditions and religion. And whenever Jesus entered this foreign land, wonderful things began to happen – teachings, healings and awe-inspiring ministry – even gentiles who knew nothing of God finding faith in what Jesus could do. We should pause a moment to consider this. What do you think it says to us? To me, it seems to suggest that it is when we cross the boundary of the familiar and enter the habitat of the stranger, the foreigner, the person unknown to us – that that is when the miracles and wonders of the faith take place. That's the first part of the story, and its message is powerful.

The disciples headed out, but as they reached the middle of the sea, a storm arose and began to toss the small boat so that they could not make it to the shore. In the early morning darkness, at the break of dawn, they saw

what appeared to be someone walking on the water toward them, and they were afraid. “Take heart,” Jesus said. “It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

Here ends the second part of the story, and if the story ended at this point, it would already be a good story, and, in fact, we could choose to stop right here and allow Jesus’ words of assurance to ease our minds. As we traverse our own tumultuous seas, out in the night of stormy frustration, unable to navigate our way to the peaceful but distant shore, how good it is to hear Jesus’ words, “Take heart. It is I. Don’t be afraid.” This is the word of personal assurance that stirs our hearts with thankfulness for the companionship of God. So let’s pause again for a moment here, and ask ourselves the question: What are the tumults of our souls that we bring to our worship today? It is our nature to have them – anxieties about our health and wellbeing, worries about our kids, or about our parents. Will the jittery stock market affect my savings? Is Social Security really secure? Is this pandemic going to go on forever? Will I get sick and die, or will I lose someone I love? Is our nation in a political crisis? O, I really need a vacation!

The boat is an ancient symbol for the church, and, in some ways, we can easily imagine our own church as the place we come, either physically or as we do right now in spiritual unity, to be safe in the company of friends to ride out the storms of life and hear the words of reassurance. “Take heart. It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

Let’s just take a little time with this, because it is an important gift of faith. We do not know, any of us, how to navigate our lives from shore to shore. So I invite you to take a moment for meditation, as I read the words of a beloved hymn of comfort and assurance:

*Jesus, Savior, pilot me over life’s tempestuous sea.
Unknown waves before me roll, hiding rock and treacherous shoal;
Chart and compass came from Thee: Jesus, Savior, pilot me.*

*As a mother stills her child, Thou canst hush the ocean wild;
Boisterous waves obey Thy will when Thou sayest to them, "Be still."
Wondrous Sovereign of the sea, Jesus, Savior, pilot me.*

*When at last I near the shore, and the fearful breakers roar
'Twixt me and the peaceful rest, then, while leaning on Thy breast,
May I hear Thee say to me, "Fear not, I will pilot thee."*

(Rev. Edward Hopper, 1871)

"God is good. All the time."

As we move through this story about Jesus walking on the Sea of Galilee I think we can treat it as a parable filled with symbols that we can use to apply to our own lives. Already it has spoken to us, reminding us how important it is to have a safe community as we traverse the traumas of our lives, and then reassuring us with the words of Jesus, "Take heart, it is I. Don't be afraid." But there is still more to come. There is more to come in the story; and there is more to come also in our lives. The third part of the story rests upon the foundation of the assurances we have already received, and the gift of faith that they have instilled in us.

Be careful now, because Jesus never leaves us where we were before. He's going to call us to get out of the boat!

What does this mean? As Jesus approaches, one of the disciples, the bold but sometimes reckless Peter immediately senses the challenge: "Lord," he says, "if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Jesus says "Come," as simple as that, and Peter begins to walk upon the water. What does this mean?

Well, it's a parable, and the nature of a parable is that it doesn't mean the same thing to everyone. I can only tell you what it means to me. What it means to you is up to you. A word of caution, though: Remember, it almost didn't work out well for Peter, and he was very close to Jesus when he tried it. He stepped into the water in the strength of his faith in Jesus, and

began to leave his zone of safety, but when the wind began slapping him, he lost his confidence and began to sink. Now that's a clue! You have to know that if you try to follow Jesus in troubled times you can expect to be slapped by the wind. If that doesn't happen, there's a good chance you're really not following him.

One of Peter's most likeable characteristics as he is described in the Scriptures is that he was willing to make mistakes. His most common mistake was to commit himself before he had counted the cost. He did it again and again. Peter was always volunteering, but sometimes he was unable to follow through.

If we want to follow Jesus, it's important that we count the cost, because the cost can be greater than we thought it could be, and our commitment needs to include our full awareness of what we will give to follow him. The cost of following Jesus across the troubled waters of our time includes the discomfort of challenging some of the attitudes of people you love, the risk of being misunderstood or even shunned for acquiring unpopular beliefs, the accusation of being on the wrong or ungodly side in the culture wars of our time. But following Jesus is not about trying to offend people or be unpleasant; it's about seeking the truth you can find only by learning from the life experience of others.

Jesus invites us to get out of the boat, because the world we live in requires people of faith to learn how to walk on the troubled waters of our time. The work of Christian people is to follow the example of Jesus. The work is healing, just as it was for him. But like Jesus and his disciples, if we want to bring healing ministry to our world, sometimes we need to go over to the other side – that place where those regarded as godless gentiles live, and where miracles of faith surprise us by the grace of God. To me, this means listening to the voices of those who feel oppression, exclusion, danger, or inequality in our society, taking them seriously, discovering the truth that lies within them, and finding ways to affirm their humanity and their right to fairness.

What you do with that depends a lot on who you are and where you find yourself in life. For some, it's important to engage in protest, as so many of our young people have been doing this year. For some, the annual celebrations of Pride week are a vehicle for affirming a family member or friend who is gay. Writing a facebook post or responding to one you find offensive can be helpful if done with care, though you have to be prepared for a few mean responses. Many people these days are joining one or another of the many small groups sponsored by churches, community organizations, schools, the YWCA and others to learn together about how sometimes unconscious racial attitudes affect our lives and the structures of our society. But let's not forget the simple things either. We can read the literature of people whose life and culture is different from our own with an eye to growing in our understanding. Then we can share with family and friends the insights that excite us and make us more aware. The point is, when somebody who lives on the other side says they think there's a problem in the world they occupy, they're usually right. But the only way we'll ever know is by getting out of the boat!

Our Time of Prayer

We confess, God, we are often slow to listen when you call to us in the voices of those who have felt discrimination and rejection. We confess that our desire to believe in the essential goodness of our society sometimes blinds us to the pains and troubles of our world. God, call us to listen, call us to see, call us to ask the questions and seek the answers that we cannot come to by ourselves.

So call us, God, like you called Jesus and his disciples, to cross over to the other side and listen for those voices our world has often misunderstood or disregarded. As we cross the troubled waters of this sea of discontent that sometimes seems like it will overwhelm us, and when we become frightened about what the conflicts we see will do to change our world, remind us of the comforting words of Jesus walking in the midst of the storms around us, "Take heart. It is I. Don't be afraid." Then may we be moved by your Spirit to walk to you across life's waters, so that we may share the healing your Gospel brings to a troubled world.

Let us pray in the words of our Lord Jesus:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom
come, Thy will be
done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and
forgive us our
debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but
deliver us from
evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever.
Amen.**

**The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God our Heavenly Parent, and
the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.**