

“A Calming Presence”
Matthew 14:22-31
Sunday, August 9, 2020
A sermon by
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Jesus comes to the disciples in their most desperate moments, offering grace, calm and new possibilities.

On those lazy, humid summer days of childhood, a group of kids from my neighborhood would always end up in our backyard. In those waning days of summer vacation, time was precious. School was about to start and the glorious days of playing all day were about to end. But the problem always was that by this point in summer, all of the really fun things had been accomplished. It was in these days, my mom always said, that kids were getting tired of looking at each other. How did mom know what it would be like to endure a pandemic?

In those days when we were growing tired of each other, when all the games had been played, all the adventures completed, the conversation between the guys in the neighborhood would go like this: “What do you want to do?” “I dunno, what do you want to do?” “I know,” someone said, “we could go exploring the woods.” “We did that yesterday,” someone would say.” “So what do you want to do?” And the answer would come: “I dunno...what do you want to do?”

And then it would dawn on us: a beautiful idea! Let’s build a fort! Suddenly we were filled with purpose and energy and off we’d go to collecting the supplies for building a fort. Our fortresses, constructed of sticks and cardboard boxes and the occasional 2X4 were solidly built encampments of safety and hope.

The other day I read that as the shut-down spread across the United States last spring, parents began noticing the fort building activities of their children. Across

homes, dining room chairs were being acquisitioned as sheets were draped across chairs. “Being cooped up inside is hard,” one writer says, “So in our living rooms, bedrooms and basements, kids are turning to fort-building to create safe havens as the covid-19 world feels out of their control.”¹

Child development experts say fort-building is an essential act of child development. Among other functions, the fort provides a child a place where they can see out, but you cannot see in. It becomes a place of safety.

It also becomes a place where courage can be imagined.

More than a dozen years ago, we had a youth retreat from Woodlawn Chapel. During the evening, I heard some rustling around in the boy’s cabin, so I went over to check on what was happening. I knocked on the door – and I kid you not – these young men, all of whom are now successful adults, I might add -- had taken the sheets off their bunks and built a fort. They looked at me with a deer in the headlights look. But instead of telling them to put the beds back in place, we took that safe place and had an amazing evening of talking.

In the fearful moments of change, we need places of retreat, places of safety.

But we also need places of calm where we can imagine courage.

This is at the heart of the gospel lesson this morning. In this familiar story, Jesus needs some space. Matthew does not tell us that Jesus built a fort, but he is clear that Jesus cannot continue the tempo and pace of ministry without acts of self-care. Jesus puts some distance between himself and the others and draws close to God. In the quiet of that moment, Jesus centers himself in the presence of God.

If we were to sing today, we might sing Shirley Murray’s hymn, “Come and Find the Quiet Center.”

Come and find the quiet center in the crowded life we lead;
find the room for hope to enter, find the frame where we are freed:

¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2020/05/18/why-kids-love-building-forts-why-experts-say-they-might-need-them-more-than-ever/>

clear the chaos and the clutter, clear our eyes that we can see:
all the things that really matter, be at peace and simply be.”²

But peace, even for Jesus, is fleeting. As evening fell, the winds began blowing. While Jesus has been alone in the quiet, the disciples have been tossed about by dangerous winds. They are now far from land. Matthew reminds us once more that discipleship is perilous.

Pitched back and forth against the waves, tossed around the angry sea, they can see no clear path forward. They are exhausted and seasick.

And then Jesus shows up.

He comes striding across the stormy seas, searching for his disciples. He comes for them. In the grey light of stormy weather, the disciples see someone – something – approaching, and immediately they become afraid.

What astounds me is that these are sea-hardened fishermen who knew how to handle themselves in choppy water. The disciples are not frightened by the waves, the wind, or the water. They are afraid of Jesus, whom they do not recognize.

They are afraid, of course, because they know that it is only God who tames the wild seas. They know that scriptures reminds us that the God of Israel tramples on the waves and walks in the recesses of the deepest waters. They are afraid because Jesus is clearly acting in a way reserved for God alone.

Let’s not worry about the details. I am less worried about where and how Jesus took swimming lessons than in the assurance and confidence he offers as he approaches the disciples. They are afraid, but he says to them, “Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid.”

He offers the calm assurance of the quiet center in the middle of a storm.

He reminds them of the words God spoke to Moses from the flames of the burning bush, “I AM!” God’s words to Moses were clear: “Tell Pharaoh “I am” has

² Shilrey E. Murray, “Come and Find the Quiet Center,” 1989, Words and Music copyright by Hope Music, used by permission OneLicense.net <https://hymnary.org/hymn/CH1995/575>.

sent you.” Matthew’s audience would not have missed the reference, nor should we.

Take heart, Jesus says. Have courage. You are never beyond the reach of God. “It is I.”

The story continues with Peter’s desire to walk on the wild side. It is a reminder that sometimes our attempts at finding courage will fail, that sometimes our fears will hold us back. At times, the church has used this passage to chide Peter about what he did wrong, but I believe Jesus is telling the disciples, telling Peter, telling us this: Find courage to withstand the storm.

We waste energy wondering what Peter did wrong. Did he take his eyes off Jesus? Did he get anxious? Was the water colder than he expected, breaking his feverish concentration?

Jesus tells Peter, “Why did you doubt? Why did you forget that God is breaking into the world in new ways? Didn’t I tell you, “Have courage?”

The real question is this: How will you recognize Jesus in the middle of a storm?

Look around you: this is no easy time. Children, parents, and teachers are all uncertain of what is ahead for them. The waves are fierce.

Look around you: there are essential workers, the clerks in grocery stores, restaurant workers, nurses, doctors, pharmacists, chaplains...all of them out in the storm of Covid-19. It became quite personal to our family this week as we learned our nephew and niece are sick with the virus – she is a physician and has been treating hundreds of Covid 19 patients in California.

Look around you: this is not an easy time.

Look around you: and see Christ coming to us, just as he came to the disciples.

So much of our lives right now feel as though we are those disciples tossed about in a tiny boat. We are living in what amounts to be a “perfect storm” of forces clashing around us. Let me be clear: I do not believe that Jesus asks us to

ignore the science surrounding coronavirus or any other matter of life. Wear seat belts and wash your hands. Stay out of large crowds.

But look around, and imagine courage as you hear Jesus say, “Take heart. It is I.” Amen.