

In the Face of a Corona Storm
John 6:16-21; 2 Timothy 1:7

The Gospel story takes place at night on the sea when it is dark. A sudden storm has arisen, as is typical on the Sea of Galilee. A strong wind is blowing, provoking rough waves. The disciples have rowed about four miles, so they are in the middle of this inland lake, far from the safety of the shore and at the heart of the storm.

Did you notice the fact that “Jesus had not yet come to them?” Where is Jesus? Why did they leave shore without Jesus? The story prior to this one is the feeding of five thousand people with a young boy’s five barley loaves and two fish. In the presence of Jesus, the food multiplies to feed the crowd, with twelve baskets of leftovers. The people marvel at Jesus’ powerful presence. But Jesus recognizes that his mission is in danger. He withdraws to the mountain by himself to commune with God. Jesus is experiencing his own storm of conflicting demands upon his life and ministry. He needs Sabbath time and space to center himself in his divine calling.

The disciples leave Jesus behind on the mountain to pray. What are they thinking? Do they expect him to take the next boat? Are they needing some time apart from this man to whom they’ve given their lives, but who seems to be leading them into dangerous territory? Are they so accustomed to being independent, to being in control, that they automatically go on their way without bringing Jesus along for the ride?

They climb into the boat, even though it is evening. In the Gospel of John, darkness is a powerful symbol indicating unbelief and opposition to Jesus. The disciples are not terrified by the storm, but rather by the figure approaching them on the sea. As he draws near, Jesus assures them, “It is I; do not be afraid.” Once they recognize Jesus, they want to bring him into the boat. And immediately the boat reaches the land.

Throughout life we find ourselves in storms of various kinds. Two and a half years ago this community was caught in a devastating firestorm. Just five months ago we were on the cusp of another firestorm, with Public Safety Power Shutoffs and evacuation of thousands from their homes. Now it is not just our community but our world which is caught in a viral storm of global proportions. We’re hunkered down in our homes, if we have a home, to protect not only ourselves, but to protect one another and the common good.

This is an unsettling time. It is a frightening time. It is an uncertain time. One scientist said that this is not a sprint; it will be a marathon. We thought that power outages were our new normal, and they may be as we’ve had insufficient rainfall this winter. Now we face an even starker reality about the fragility of life and the web of connection in which we live. This storm is of proportions that the world has never seen.

As we set sail on uncertain waters, let us not leave Jesus behind. Here at the outset, let us bring Jesus into the boat with us. The disciples are relieved when they realize that it is Jesus walking to them on the water. They move aside to make room in the boat for their beloved Teacher and Companion. They yearn for the intimacy, comfort, and guidance Jesus provides.

Although the disciples had seemingly abandoned Jesus, he shows up to them in a time of need. They don't necessarily ask, pray for, or invite his presence. He simply shows up and says, "It is I; be not afraid." These words are similar to the divine name given to Moses upon God's appearance in the burning bush, "I am who I am." In John's Gospel, Jesus continues this theme, "I am the bread of life," "I am the light of the world," "I am the good shepherd," "I am the resurrection and the life." All of these images say, "I am with you in ways that nourish you, that guide you, that accompany you. I am with you. It is I; do not be afraid."

Wherever you are in this global storm, whatever you feel like in your personal storm, imagine Jesus walking through the storm to accompany you. Hear Jesus say to you, "It is I; do not be afraid." Make room for Jesus to climb in your boat beside you. Give him an oar and share the burden of moving forward with him. Allow him to take the lead and follow closely behind. Don't leave Jesus behind in this storm; bring him along with you.

We can take some cues for weathering storms from Jesus. When he was in trouble, he withdrew to pray. He spent time in stillness, listening for the still small voice of God. This season of social isolation offers us more time to pray, to tune our hearts to God, to fill our hearts with divine love so that our hearts might beat with compassionate love for others. A breath prayer helps me center myself in God's presence. My breath prayer has long been from Psalm 46, "Be still and know that I am God." As I slowly inhale, I pray, "Be still." As I exhale, I pray, "Know God." This practice stills my mind and centers my soul. "Be still, know God."

In this strange new season, there are many ways to pray. We might pray through a Gospel or through the Psalms. As a phrase or verse strikes you, meditate on it through the day. Journal with it.

I encourage you to pray through your church directory. Pray for each person by name, inviting Jesus to be in the boat with them through their storms. Prayer for another might prompt you to reach out with a phone call to ask, "How goes it with your soul?" "What's sustaining your spirit in these days?" Share a verse from your scripture reading that was meaningful to you. These spiritual connections through phone calls, texts, and emails will be a vital source of sustenance for us in these times. We already know that there is an epidemic of loneliness in our society. A new Lenten discipline

would be to call a different person each day to check in, let them know that you are thinking about them, and praying for them. These personal connections mean so much in this time of forced isolation. Telephones and technology can keep us connected with one another. People appreciate prayers even via the telephone or text or email.

Yesterday I was at the hospital to see a church member. Before departing I offered a prayer. A nurse was with the patient in the next bed, but I sensed that she paused during the prayer. The prayer included petition for all the patients in the hospital and for health professionals who are caring for the rest of us in these trying times, putting their own lives at risk. When I finished, the nurse said, "Thank you. I needed to hear that." Prayer with others is a powerful way to remind them that they are not alone, they need not be afraid, for Jesus is in the boat along with them. Prayer helps us weather the storm.

In this passage, Jesus speaks but a few words, but they are powerful. "It is I; do not be afraid." With these words, he indicates that he sees the disciples; he recognizes their terror; he empathizes with their fear. He expresses his solidarity with them, "It is I; I am here with you." We can never underestimate the power of a few kind words.

Thursday I joined the crowds at Costco. I was grateful that I was simply picking up a prescription. After a relatively brief wait in line, I went to the counter. I had overheard the clerk tell someone else that when the store opened at 9 a.m., it was chaos. This was a long two hours later. As she was ringing up my order, I said, "Thank you for continuing to serve us in these difficult times." Amazed, she said, "Thank you for saying that." As I departed, I said, "Peace be with you." She responded, "Please continue that attitude of kindness." I sensed that she had endured some harsh comments earlier in the day.

In times of stress, people take it out on others. We project our anger and we hurt one another in the process. As followers of Christ, if we keep ourselves anchored in faith and prayer, we will practice acts of kindness which ripple out and positively impact the lives of others. Right now our world is in desperate need of multiple acts of kindness. It is a matter of being intentional about our words and about our interactions with those whom we know and with those whom we don't know. Words and acts of kindness help us weather the storm.

Jesus was about developing relationships with his disciples. The disciples' relationship with Jesus was the cornerstone of their faith. His presence with them was so compelling that they had given their lives to be with him.

It is incumbent on us to consider the power and significance of our relationships. Just as the disciples hungered for intimacy, comfort, and guidance from Jesus, every human being longs for such companionship. How comforting is our presence? Are we

fully present, given the distractions of our world? When we are with someone, are we in the present moment, attentive to their words, feelings, body language, and needs?

This forced social distancing could be the opportunities to grow in relationship with those in our small circles of concern. We can be intentional about playing together, reading together, taking a walk, enjoying one another's company. In the absence of spectator and participatory sports, we can create our own games. Remember those old-fashioned board games? This is a good season to pull them out and play together to interact with one another.

Lest we allow television or video games or smart phones to consume us, we can set limits on their use to ensure that we are engaging with others. And it is wise to limit our intake of media news. It can be overwhelming. A break allows us to focus on the good news of God's presence with us, the good news of relationships we have to cultivate, and the good news of countless simple gifts for which we can be grateful.

I was reminded of the importance of relationships when my dad called me last week. I realized I hadn't spoken to him in about two weeks. We send him hard copies of my sermons. He told me that when he receives an envelope with one, he always opens it first and reads it right away. He said, "I love talking to you." It warmed my heart, but also made me recognize that I don't give him enough attention. Who would love to talk to you more in these days? Who would love to receive a hand-written note from you in the mail this week? What relationship is God calling you to cultivate?

We can weather this storm, my friends, by inviting Jesus to ride in this boat along with us. Don't leave Jesus on the pages of the scripture; invite Jesus into your heart and into your life. With Jesus, spend time in prayer, prayer for yourself, those whom you love, those in your extended circle of concern, prayer for those who care for us and those who lead us. Like Jesus, speak some simple words of kindness and encouragement to let people know that they are appreciated and that we are in solidarity with them. Like Jesus, cultivate relationships with those close to you and with those who are lonely and in need of a friendly call in these difficult days. With Jesus as our companion, and alongside the global community of God's family, we will find our way to the other side of this storm. Do not be afraid.