

January 29, 2017 (Journey worship)

TEXT: Matthew 14:22–33

TITLE: Starting Over

By the Rev. Heather Schoenewolf

Sometimes I wish that life was easier. I wish that the scanners on the self-checkout aisles worked better. I wish that doctor appointments ran on time. I wish that clothes didn't stain so easily when I drop food on them while I am eating.

But, truth be told, these problems are all related to the blessings of having money to purchase things at the store; access to excellent health care; and plenty of food to eat.

Sometimes a little perspective can point out the blessing behind the challenge. And sometimes perspective can show us that, in all reality, some problems are harder than others.

I *do* wish that life was easier—for all of us. I wish that cancer did not exist. I wish that some people didn't have to choose between paying the light bill and putting food on the table. I wish that everyone had a safe place to sleep at night. I wish that people didn't face discrimination that kept them out of jobs, housing or even countries.

Life, while beautiful, can be hard. Whether we are facing a “terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day,” where nothing seems to go right—or whether we are facing a debilitating crisis of health or finance or relationship – a universal truth is that we all face storms in our life...and plenty of them.

There are some storms that we see can coming. We do our best to prepare: we stock up on provisions, draw support to ourselves, or move to higher ground. We trust that with a thoughtful enough effort and a helping of grace we will be ok.

But others come on us in an instant, and seem to catch us out of nowhere. They shake us to our core. Like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, we are set spinning out of control—and into unfamiliar territory with no clue of how we can get back home.

[I still remember vividly January 28, 1986—a snowstorm closed the schools, my sisters had the flu. I couldn't walk for an infection in my spine for which I would later be hospitalized, and while watching *The Price is Right* we learned that the Space Shuttle Challenger exploded. Then, at around 7:00 that night, my mom came home from the hospital and shared the news that Pap was dying of lung cancer that had spread throughout his whole body. He would die two days after I got out of the hospital for my back. There are some storms we'll never forget.]

Our scripture passage this morning takes us to the heart of a storm. While Jesus is up on a mountain in prayer, the disciples are trying to cross the sea, battling against the wind and the waves. They seem to be getting nowhere. While it is not uncommon for sailors to encounter storms at sea, there is something perplexing about this passage. It

is almost as if Jesus sent them into the storm. He retreats alone to the mountaintop to encounter God, but instructs the disciples to head out on the water ahead of him. Then the text tells us that he sees the boat being buffeted by the waves from the mountain above.

Now, we might ask—why doesn't he *do* something? He is Jesus, after all. We know already that the wind and the waters obey him. Couldn't he just say, as he had done in the past, "Peace, be still," and quiet the waters again? Then the disciples could cross the water and get a good night's sleep, and he could stay on the mountain and pray a bit longer. It really could have been so easy!

But instead, Jesus starts walking on the water toward the boat—right into the heart of the storm. He walks on the waves. He walks into the wind. He walks toward the disciples, only offering a word of comfort after they cry out in fear that he is a ghost. And when Peter jumps into action, testing Jesus and their collective safety, Jesus invites him to step out on the water with him and walk upon the waves. The waters weren't stilled—it was the wind that scared Peter, after all. But Jesus invited Peter to step right out into the storm, bare feet and all.

Why didn't Jesus first quiet the waters? Why didn't he silence the winds? If he had, maybe Peter wouldn't have grown so afraid. If he had, maybe the disciples would have recognized him sooner. If he had, maybe the disciples would have grown even more confident of his power and of his grace. Why did he let it get so complicated? It could have been so easy!

We don't know the answers to these questions, but we can sure shrug our shoulders and say: *well, that's life, isn't it?* We encounter storms and we have to learn how to navigate them. Some storms seem to be for our benefit: they become the source of our growth and our strength. As we face the storm we realize who our true friends are, and we discover what is essential in life. We see what we are made of and where we are headed.

But sometimes the storm is just a storm: a natural occurrence brewed up by a confluence of circumstances. Not a punishment or test or a blessing in disguise...just a storm, being a storm. Sometimes the storm just happens—not because of anything we've done or left undone. Sometimes a storm is nothing personal—it is nothing we brought on ourselves and is not something we can control. It is just something we face and have to make it through.

So what do we do?

Well, Peter's impetuous example teaches us a lesson. We learn from him that our potential to navigate a storm is qualitatively different when we put our faith in Christ and place our focus on him. In Christ we can see the fullness of our potential—we can find hidden strength and ability to face the winds that threaten us. In Christ we can discern where we are and where we are heading—we cannot simply see the proverbial light at

the end of the tunnel, but we can start to take steps to get there. In Christ we can find someone in whom we can place our trust. In Christ we can find strength, courage, and a lot of hope.

See, the text shows us that Christ doesn't engage the world from a mountaintop far, far away. In Jesus, God is with US—even in our storms. As he did with the disciples, Jesus steps out into the storm with us, over and over again, and will remind us continually that we are not, ever, alone. Through all kinds of storms, Jesus meets us where we are and reminds us that even when life is hard, ultimately we are held in the palm of God's hand.

Now, I wanted to end my sermon there. I wanted to share a simple word of needed hope as we navigate the personal storms of our lives. But given the events of this week, I can't in clear conscience stop there.

I think that it is important as a people of faith that we remember that we alone do not have the market on storms.

There are people right now who have no safe place to sleep at night because their homes have been destroyed by insurrection at the hand of their own government. Ordinary people—trying to make a nutritious breakfast for their kids and wash their family's clothes and earn a living. But all that was once normal has been taken from them, and they, literally, have nowhere to go.

There are men, women and children trying to find safety—risking their own lives on rocky waters to find a haven where their families can simply be families without threat or harm. We have seen, over the past year or more, stories of families losing their lives as they make these dangerous journeys—reminded that the treachery of the sea was far better than the treachery they were facing at home.

We must remember that Jesus did not come *just* for us but for ALL. Jesus' salvation is not just for the disciples on the boat that day—but *it spans space and time and race and creed and gender and sexual identity and even religion!* And Jesus has even made it possible for us to ourselves step out of the boat and into the storm that we might help and encourage and stand with someone else in need. It may take a lot of faith. It might be difficult. But we need to fix our eyes on Jesus: *stay focused on his message of loving welcome, stay focused not on our own fear but on his power to save.*

From this view, the world looks different. We see in the refugee members of our own family. We see in the Muslim man or woman, brothers and sisters simply wishing to worship God in the manner that is most authentic to their spirit. We see in the immigrant our own grandparents and great grandparents who crossed oceans to start over with their loved ones in a new land. When we look into the eyes of Christ, we see that the ones who are outcast—the ones that we are being taught to fear—are not monsters or enemies but are *US*.

There is crisis in our personal lives, and there is crisis in this world. In the face of crisis it is tempting to try to baton down the hatches and hide away from the storm that is brewing. But sometimes we are called to sail against the winds and stand up to the storm. We might find courage if we remember that punishing the vulnerable will not heal us, but will rather further wound humanity. We must remember that marginalizing the outcast only puts us each one step closer to a label that will restrict our basic human rights—rights that many of us in this room have fought to earn or protect for ourselves and for others. We must remember that the command of Christ is to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves, and if we wish to live out our faith we must put this love into serious practice—not just when it is convenient or easy for us, but when it is challenging, and even when it is risky.

When we look into the heart of the storm, let us search the waters for Christ, who is surely drawing near. Let us fix our gaze upon his eyes, not only that we might see him and find hope, but that we might, perhaps, see the world around us through his eyes: eyes of justice, eyes of redemption, eyes of love.

And storms brew and “alternative facts” clutter up the airwaves, may remember that the truth *will* set us free. May we cling to the truth we find in Christ, may we find hope in the truth of his promises, and may we, with courage, step out in faith, that this truth might shape our whole lives.

Amen.