

**The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza**  
**The Church of the Good Shepherd**  
**The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost – Sunday, August 9, 2020**  
**Matthew 14:22-33**

*Lord of all life, help us to work together for that day when your kingdom comes and justice and mercy will be seen in all the earth. Look with favor on your people, gather us in your loving arms, and bring us with all the saints to feast at your table in heaven. Amen.*

What a year this has been! 2020 will most likely go down in our country's history books as the longest year in generations. It's hard to even remember all that has transpired in just over seven months. We have seen the violence of hatred and fear... and the courage of calls for justice and mercy. We have felt the erosion caused by divisiveness and rancor.... and the salvation found in coming together in love. We have seen the tearing down of controversial symbols... and the raising of new images of perseverance and selfless service. We have felt the danger, fear and uncertainty caused by the pandemic.... and the many creative ways we have launched new connections with each other. We have seen the closing of our church doors... and the strengthening of our communal lives as the Body of Christ by a renewed sense of God's presence and mission.

We are living in turbulent and frightening times – buffeted on all sides with numerous dangers that threaten our physical health and survival, social equanimity and cohesion, economic sustainability, and emotional wellbeing. These are very real existential threats and they seem to demand every waking moment of our time and focus, leaving little energy for seeking the presence of God. When times are this tempestuous and the danger this real, it can be hard to remember to maintain a faithful reliance on God. It can feel like there is little spiritual room left for us to seek out and be receptive to the grace of God that soothes and softens our hearts, and transforms our fear into the faith that will heal the world.

It is in this current environment of tumult and fear that the psalmist speaks these words to us this morning:

8 I will listen to what the Lord God is saying, \*  
for he is speaking peace to his faithful people  
and to those who turn their hearts to him.

9 Truly, his salvation is very near to those who fear him, \*  
that his glory may dwell in our land.

10 Mercy and truth have met together; \*  
righteousness and peace have kissed each other.

In the midst of fearsome turmoil and existential uncertainty, the psalmist reminds us to listen for the quiet word of God, that may always be heard by those who faithfully turn their hearts to him *despite* their fear. It is there that we may find the real presence of God and experience the blessed salvation in which “mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other.”

Our Old Testament and Gospel lessons today provide important examples of seeking the peaceful presence of God amid a turbulent and frightening world. In our first lesson, the Old Testament prophet Elijah has been on the run. Queen Jezebel, who worshipped the fertility god Baal, has called for Elijah's death and the prophet has traveled for 40 days and 40 nights to Mount Horeb, where Moses had received the Ten Commandments, and is now hiding out in a cave there. In the dark of night, he anxiously awaits a word from God. When it comes, he is told to go out and wait, for the Lord is about to pass by.

A series of terrifying phenomena occur – a great wind strong enough to split mountains and break rocks, a terrible earthquake, and a tremendous fire – but Elijah does not find the Lord in any of them. Only in the sound of sheer silence that follows did Elijah find the presence of God. Despite the frightening things happening around him Elijah was faithful enough – or desperate enough – to stand still and listen for presence of God. For his faithfulness in the face of fear, he is rewarded with hearing the “still small voice” of God.

Our Gospel lesson gives us another image of faith and fear. After the feeding of the five thousand, Matthew's narrative shifts focus from the wilderness to the sea – from God's provision in the desert to God's deliverance through the waters. Jesus dismisses the crowds and send the disciples ahead to cross the Sea of Galilee while he retires alone up the mountain to pray in peace. The situation on the sea, however, is perilous. It's been a long and sleepless night with the disciples' boat being battered by frightening winds and waves. Suddenly, they see Jesus calmly walking toward them on the sea and they are terrified. Startled by the vision, they cry out in fear, but Jesus assures them, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

The story now shifts its attention to Peter. Ever the impetuous disciple, Peter recognizes his Lord and blurts out that he wants nothing more than to join him. "Come," Jesus bids, and Peter boldly steps out of his comfort zone and the safety of the boat onto the impossible stage of the waters. But then he takes his attention off Jesus and focuses instead on the turbulence around him – the wind, the buffeting waves, the craziness and drama of the moment. It is then that he begins to sink and cries out for salvation from the water, and Jesus reaches out to catch him.

Fear is the recurring theme in this story. The phrases "terrified," "cried in fear," "do not be afraid," and "became frightened" all occur in just eleven verses – Matthew wants us to take note of the role of fear. The disciples are terrified of the vision of Jesus walking toward them on the water. This may be the fear of the unknown, or the fear that is present during the challenges of our lives. Fear, too, may have been a motivator, moving Peter to risk going toward Jesus with the desperation of seeking even improbable safety in the storm. We also see fear mingled with distraction as Peter's attention is drawn from Jesus to the wind and waves that crash around him. When Peter notices the wind, fear of his situation overwhelms his faith. As one theologian writes, "So, when we fear Jesus moving toward us, or our fear moves us toward Jesus, or our fear distracts us, Jesus remains the constant enemy of all the faces of fear." "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Focusing on the presence of God restores the proper balance so that faith is not subsumed by fear.

As Elijah needed the courage to listen past the fearful turbulence of wind, earthquake, and fire to find the quiet peaceful presence of God, so too are the disciples called to see beyond the wind, water, and storm to find their Lord walking toward them and calling them to step out. This listening and seeking for God amid the fearful distractions all around requires the courage of faith that allows us to act – not *without* fear but *despite* it. God calls us to step out in faith, trusting that where God leads may be unknown to us, but the promise is sure that God will be there with us. My favorite part of our Gospel lesson is not that Peter courageously stepped forward faith, rather what happened when doubt inevitably overcame his faith. Peter wanted to trust Jesus in an impossible thing, and he did so – but he did so imperfectly. And Jesus saves him anyway. *Imperfect trust is the kind of faith we all live with.*

Jesus calls out not only to Peter, but to each one of us, "Come" and bids that we, too, step out of the boat into the unknown and onto uncertain ground. And we can be assured that no matter the stormy waters and winds, if we step out in faith, our Lord is beside us and will catch us as we inevitably succumb to fear. We are fallible creatures and, thanks be to God, even the imperfect trust of our fragile faith (faith perhaps only the size of a mustard seed) is enough.

In our faith, we are carried beyond the limitations of our fear to journey the path of transformation. Reconciling our fear and faith, we are restored to wholeness and, to our surprise, we become agents of transformation in the world. With this, we help to build the kingdom where God's perfect love may be fully mirrored in the hearts of all people and where "mercy and truth [meet] together, and righteousness and peace [kiss] each other".

Amen.