

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL  
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

August 16, 2020

SONG “*Leaning on the Everlasting Arms*”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Good morning, my friends! And welcome together again as the people of God, the community of faith we call the United Church of Christ Congregational in Wallace. Welcome into the presence of God for the worship of God. It is good to be together. And it is good to live and walk through these days in the confidence that whether we are gathered or scattered, we are still the Body of Christ, still knit together as one, still held by the love and grace and power of God. Let us worship our loving God together.

CALL TO WORSHIP

In the beginning, before time, before people, before the world began,

**God was.**

Here and now, among us, beside us, clearer than air, closer than breathing,

**God is.**

In all that is to come, when we have turned to dust, and human knowledge has been completed,

**God will be.**

Not despairing of earth but delighting in it, not condemning the world but redeeming it, through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit,

**God was, God is, God will be.**

*(A Wee Worship Book, Fifth Incarnation, Wild Goose Resource Group)*

SONG “*O Sing a Song*”

O sing a song of Nazareth, of days of joy and sun,  
O sing of fragrant flowers’ breathe, and of the sinless One:  
For now the flowers of Nazareth in every heart may grow;  
now spreads the fame of Jesus’ name on all the winds that blow.

O sing a song of Galilee, of lake and woods and hill,  
of One who walked upon the sea and bade its waves be still:  
For though, like waves on Galilee, rough seas and trouble roll,  
when faith has heard the Savior’s word, falls peace upon the soul.

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (in unison)

**O God who is greater than the most powerful forces in this world, enable us to be still and know that you are God. O Lord who answers out of the whirlwind of everyday life, breathe in us your Holy Spirit to strengthen, comfort, and guide us in the midst of the storm. O still, small voice, speak to us this hour that we might become makers of Your peace in our homes, in our communities, in our world. We pray all this in the name of the One who calmed the raging sea. Amen.**

*(from My Redeemer Lives website.)*

SCRIPTURE READING 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 worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

### SERMON

If you've been listening to me yammer on for very long, more than likely you've heard me talk about my relationship with water. Maybe even enough times that hearing me say that prompts you to roll your eyes and think about shutting the video down and moving on into your day. I remember once hearing my mother comment that she thought that as a young child, I had really taken to water, and she couldn't figure out when or why that changed. I don't remember that. All I remember is not being overly fond of it, being happiest when my feet touched bottom or dangled from a dock, and never enjoying being in water over my head. I made it through Advanced Beginner swimming lessons, but only because that was the requirement to put swimming lessons behind me. Wouldn't you know, I fell in love with and married a sailor? It's ironic, because actually some of my favorite times have been spent on our sailboat. It makes a great place to get away to. We used to spend a week at a time on our boat, enjoying slow mornings, exquisite meals, high quality reading time and more cookies than I have any intention of counting for you or anybody else. Every day, Ben would watch the wind and check the forecast and then find a bay or cove for us to tuck into where we could drop an anchor and spend the night. Heaven! We don't do that for nearly as long at a time on Lake Coeur d'Alene, but we do still very much enjoy nights on the lake, feeling the gentle lapping of the water, the fresh breezes stirring and quiet comfort of being out on the boat. It would be an understatement to say that I'm not as content when the wind blows, to say nothing of riding with the rails in the water while the waves knock us about like a bucking bronco. Ben has outgrown any high adventure needs he ever had, but our oldest son still lives to fill the sails and ride the waves – and if he can make me squirm and turn green in the process, it just adds to the fun.

I don't know much about boats in Jesus' day, but there are definitely aspects of today's story that my white knuckles and queasy stomach resonate with. I'd be pretty sure the disciples were out in a fishing boat, partly because some of them were fishermen, but also because these weren't days of cruising yachts and pleasure boats. Utilitarian and efficient would be my assumption. They were at the end of a day that had gone on forever, starting with the gruesome news of the beheading of John the Baptist. Endless throngs of broken and bleeding, hungry and hurting souls had pressed in on Jesus from the moment he pulled up on shore, and the disciples had mostly spent the day doing crowd control. When afternoon turned toward dusk, they'd tried to get Jesus to send the masses away, and he instead had pulled out all the stops and fed them a fine, gourmet dinner of fish and bread. Once they'd finally cleaned up all the scraps and leftovers, and set the twelve baskets in front of him, Jesus told them to get into the boat and head out while he shut things down on shore; he'd be along later. I have no idea if some of them had seen signs in the sky of what the night would bring, or if it was a storm that came out

of nowhere and caught even the most seasoned sailors by surprise, but one way or another, it was only a matter of time before they began to rock and roll, and every disciple aboard, skilled fishermen and land loving tax collectors alike, were scrambling to keep the boat afloat, and throwing the lake overboard as fast as it tried to get in and swamp their little skiff. Finally, about three in the morning, weary, worried, green in the gills and with every nerve on high alert, one of them looked up, saw something on the horizon headed their way and screamed bloody murder. Now, I'm not big on ghosts and goulies, but I totally understand that end of their rope sort of panic bordering on hysteria. And let's be honest about it: what would you expect to see in the middle of a storm in the middle of the lake in the middle of the night? And if you were looking for Jesus, where would you look? Probably not there, and probably not then.

I wonder how often any of us manage to see and recognize God's presence among us, especially in times of chaos and crisis, when we're scrambling to stay afloat and hold the pieces together, when we're white knuckled with worry and a longing to control that which absolutely refuses to be controlled. One writer said, "...our anxiety, confusion, and failure to anticipate miracles often have us missing moments of grace that surround us. We expect to meet God in church, or perhaps in the soup kitchen, but do we imagine God's presence could meet us in the laundromat, or car wash, or grocery store? Could God reach out and surprise us in the circus, or on the airplane? Ours is a God who comes at the unexpected hour in unusual, burning bush ways... It seems to be a central aspect of the human experience that our fears and superstitions blind us to the arrival of the holy. In the same way, it seems to be a central and blessed aspect of the character of God that God stands ready with a word of comfort and calm to soothe us: 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.'" (Liz Barrington Forney, *Feasting on the Gospels, Matthew, Vol. 2*, page 17)

"Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Can you tell me please what it is about those words and what in carnation they tapped into in the depths of Peter, unleashing him enough that he stepped out in front of all the others and said, Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water. Let me walk away from the smidgen of safety this boat offers and come to you across the waves and wildness of this storm. What was that about? What possibly could have possessed him? Experience tells me I'd be gripping the side rails with such intensity I'd have trouble bailing, tending sails or doing anything more than moving my butt from one side to the other in a futile attempt to try and help flatten the hull. Ask for permission to get out of the boat in order to climb further and deeper into the storm? Not in my wildest imaginings or most terrifying nightmare. What in the world has gotten in to Peter? As a friend of mine says, it's a boneheaded idea. Peter made a lot of sad and pathetic moves over the course of Jesus' ministry, but nothing nearly as boneheaded as this.

One writer has said that Peter wanted to get closer to Jesus; he wanted proximity. In the midst of the chaos and confusion of the storm, his friend was close enough that he dared to imagine he could step closer. Like a child wakes after a nightmare and walks down the hall to Mom and Dad's room, and asks to get in bed with them, so Peter asked to come to Jesus. Like a child learning to swim who longs to feel their teacher's hand under their stomach, or someone learning to ride a bike who begs the teacher to keep a hold of the fender, Peter didn't want to spend one more minute in that storm separated from Jesus. So he asked and Jesus said yes, and he stepped out into the storm and onto the water. If only he'd managed to keep his eyes on Jesus instead of looking at the water swirling under his feet and the waves lapping at his legs, he might have made it, but he became distracted and then he started to go down.

A couple of weeks ago I referenced the book and movie *Just Mercy*, by and about Bryan Stevenson's work in Alabama with the Equal Justice Initiative which he founded. It's an amazing organization that provides free legal assistance to prisoners on death row, and seeks relief for juveniles who were sentenced to lengthy incarcerations in adult facilities and for people with mental health issues whose

illness was not considered in sentencing and challenges bias against the poor and people of color in the legal system. Stevenson spends tireless hours listening to the stories of people that no one else has listened to and then works to achieve justice for them. And he credits his grandmother with instilling in him a life lesson that would come back to him the first time he visited a prisoner on death row. His grandmother's hugs were so strong, he said, they could squeeze the breath right out of a person, and when she finally released her grip, she'd wait a minute, then ask Bryan if he could still feel her hugging him. If he said yes, she'd leave him alone; if no, she'd grab him again. The words that accompanied those hugs – every time Bryan said – were these: “You can't understand most of the important things from a distance, Bryan. You have to get close.” Years later as he embarked on the unlikely course of his career, still holding on to those words, Stevenson wrote, “the distance I experienced in my first year of law school made me feel lost. Proximity to the condemned, to people unfairly judged - that was what guided me back to something that felt like home. (p.14)

Like Peter, Stevenson knew he had to get close. And I suspect there have been times when we knew that need as well: a hand to hold on to, a presence to lean on, a person to walk beside, a voice that speaks on the other end of the phone, a wrong to set right. From the outside, the notion may appear boneheaded, but more often than not, it really is in proximity to others that we realize the grace and power of love and of mercy, and that our eyes are opened to recognize the presence of God in our midst. In the moments of connection and togetherness, we find the support and strength that we need to endure the storm and live into the hope that is ours.

Jesus meets us in the storm and promises to accompany us through. When we falter and fall, he takes us by the hand and returns us to the boat, where our companions grab us by the scruff of the neck and haul us aboard, where we fall grateful and exhausted onto the slippery deck. All at once the wind ceases, the waves hush, and in the awesome silence of night becoming day, all of us who are in the boat together worship, saying: “Truly, you are the Son of God.” Amen.

#### PRAYER REQUESTS

Janice's friend Jim Shields underwent detached retina surgery on Thursday. He is doing okay and is recovering well at his sister's in Spokane.

Continued prayers for those people who are struggling with depression, anxiety and financial stresses due to our covid battles.

Prayers for the lack of leadership guidance and support in all aspects of our government from the top to the bottom...that it will change for the better.

Please pray for the postal system and its ongoing ability to serve all the people in our country

I pray for our leaders and that they “KEEP CALM” and God give them wisdom to do what's right and best for all citizens.

#### PASTORAL PRAYER

Sing: Don't be afraid, my love is stronger, my love is stronger than your fear.

Don't be afraid, my love is stronger; and I have promised, promised to be always near.

Holy and faithful God, we know more than we ever wanted to know what it is to live in the midst of a storm. A storm that sometimes appears to rage without end, that seems to gain in strength just as we hoped it was wearing out. We watch infection rates and hospitalization rates and death rates, and we wonder where it will end and when. We listen to the arguments about school and learning, safety and socialization, and look to you for paths forward that are wisest and safest, most life-giving and nurturing. We hear the frustration and anger, hurt and longing of people of color who are sick and tired of being seen as a threat, being stopped for being black, being singled out for appearing to have forgotten their place. And we know the quiet heart ache of those who simply want a meal out, a trip

home, an hour with a friend, to hold the hand of a loved one, to hug a grandchild, to touch the face of a friend instead of the glass that stands between. We see uncovered faces and undistanced crowds, biker rallies and beach parties and we long for a sense of connection that binds us to one another, that helps us to care, that honors kindness and lives with compassion.

Holy One, the storm rages on, and we look to you yet again, asking you to join us even as we seek to come to you. You know our fears, and we ask for your wisdom as we attempt to sort and sift. Help us to not be so confident or bold as to throw caution to the wind, but also to not cower in corners or burrow under covers. Give us the wisdom to know when to venture out, how to speak, where to serve, what it means to love. Plant your hope deep in our hearts, trusting you to carry us through, leaning on you as a companion and guide every step of the way.

We do pray for our country, for leaders and citizens, for all that continues to become even yet more divisive and politicized. As we move into the time of conventions and ongoing campaigning, lead us along the path to a free and fair and safe election. We ask for courage and wisdom, the willingness to speak the truth in love and listen to the cries of another's heart, for a reduction of manipulation and grandstanding and an increase of humility and honesty. Lead us, Holy God. By your mercy, help us to become more and more fully your people, walking in mercy, serving with kindness, living in love.

Sing: Don't be afraid, my love is stronger, my love is stronger than your fear.  
Don't be afraid, my love is stronger, and I have promised, promised to be always near.

#### PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (debts)

Hear us as we join together in the prayer that Jesus taught, saying: Our Father...

#### OFFERING

Last Monday, I celebrated my 40<sup>th</sup> ordination anniversary, which triggered a flood of memories and reflections about that day as well as the places and people who have been part of my journey over the course of these forty years. I even dug out the old photo album and enjoyed looking at glimpses of the people and activities that filled the weekend. Predictably, there were a few pictures of me opening gifts, and I have to confess that that is not a moment bright in my memory. One picture showed me holding up a bumper sticker I received, but honestly I could not tell you much about what I was given that weekend – with one exception. I have always cherished the memory of a young girl who came up to me after the service and slipped a \$5 bill in my pocket: not because I needed the money (though I hadn't worked all summer, and had just bought a car, so I probably did), but because of what it represented. To me, that gift spoke volumes of her generous spirit and the bond of love that she and I shared, and it meant the world to me. It wasn't about the size of the gift, but the love that motivated it.

That moment stands at the heart of what I believe about our offerings to the church on a Sunday morning or to other organizations and needs throughout the week. Some of us have a lot we can afford to give; others of us have very little. Large or small, the most precious gifts are the ones that come from the heart and are given out of love. Those are the ones that bring God the most pleasure, that build up the Church most faithfully and that do the most to spread the good news of God's unlimited, unending stream of love to us. My friends, thank you for all that you and your heart give. Amen.

#### SONG "How Great Thou Art"

O Lord, my God, when I in awesome wonder  
Consider all the worlds Thy hands have made,  
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder,  
Thy pow'r throughout the universe displayed.  
Then sings my soul, my Savior God to Thee;  
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!  
Then sings my soul, my Savior God to Thee:  
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!

When through the woods and forest glades I wander And hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees,  
When I look down from lofty mountain grandeur, And hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze...

#### BENEDICTION

So now we leave this time of worship. And while so much of the road ahead is uncertain, the path constantly changing, we know some things that are as solid and sure as the ground beneath our feet, and the sky above our heads.

We know God is love.

We know Christ's light endures.

We know the Holy Spirit is here, found in the space between all things, closer to us than our next breath, binding us to each other, until we meet we again,

Go in peace. Amen.

(Rev. Nora Vedress, Calvary United Church in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, Canada)