

1 Samuel 17: (1a, 4-11, 19-23), 32-49
Psalm 9:9-20
2 Corinthians 6:1-13
Mark 4:35-41

Proper 7B
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
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The Rev. Karen Haig

Surrender

Last week, Paul and I met with Quinton, the man who will help us rig permanent cameras in the nave for the time we can worship there again. As we were looking at all the existing lights, wiring and microphones, Quinton noticed the little red boat that's suspended from the ceiling in the nave and so we began to talk about why that boat is there. Paul told us that in Scandinavia, many churches have boats suspended from their ceilings. Looking up at the ceiling, we compared the shape of the church to an upside-down ship's hull, which is why we call the inside of the church the "nave" - it comes from the same root as the word navy or naval. It seems that little red boat suspended from the ceiling in the nave is there to remind us that we are all in this boat together, sailing ahead in faith, hope and love, no matter how stormy the seas.

The seas have felt pretty stormy for us these past many months. Living through the season of COVID – what some people are calling Covidtide – has been a bit like being adrift on a stormy sea. Life has felt both dull and chaotic. We've not been able to do the things we're accustomed to doing, give in ways we're accustomed to giving, worship in ways we're accustomed to worshipping. Some have drifted away from church, some have slammed the door behind them. Some have found new ways of deepening their faith, yet many have felt great loss. And it isn't only our personal losses we lament. So many lives have been lost, businesses lost, whole communities lost. We've experienced a collective trauma and we are still unpacking the impact of that trauma, as a people and as a church.

Some would say, and I am one of them, that the church is not a place. It isn't the physical space or the pews or even the Word or the Sacraments. The church is the Body of Christ. We are the church. But those other things matter, especially to Episcopalians who so treasure their liturgy, the Sacraments, the beauty of holiness. As I've listened to many of you during Covidtide, I've heard reactions from every direction – some of you profoundly grateful for all the work that went into streaming services so we could stay connected to and with our own church, and some who would never dream of "watching" church on an ipad at the kitchen counter. It has been traumatic, and we've wondered if the center would hold. What will we be, who will we be, will we even continue to be, after the pandemic?

While the people in first century Jerusalem weren't experiencing a world-wide pandemic, they were experiencing many of the losses we've experienced in Covidtide. Mark was writing sometime just before the year 70, a time when followers of the Way were being hunted down, persecuted and killed. The impending doom and destruction of the temple brought with it the

loss of most everything that was precious to the Jews and life as they had known it was gone. And that storm on the Sea of Galilee was a perfect metaphor for much of life in first century Jerusalem.

Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?

It's important to remember who was asking this question. We know that at least four of the men in that boat made their living from fishing and would know when it was safe to go out on the water. The storm was a fluke and it scared them to death. God did not create that storm to teach the disciples a lesson, nor did God prevent the storm so the disciples wouldn't have that terrifying experience. The storm happened and the disciples were terrified. And what was Jesus' response? To still the storm and ask why they were afraid. Doesn't it seem obvious why they were afraid? The boat was filling up with water. It was very scary. Jesus didn't say there's nothing scary out there. There are all sorts of scary things in our lives. I think the point Jesus was making is that we have choices about how we respond.

When we're afraid, when we are suffering, when the world doesn't make sense to us, it can be tempting to want a god who is supremely powerful, a ruler who will overpower and eliminate everything we're afraid of, a god who will eliminate the thoughts and influence of everyone who disagrees with what "we" want, a god who will finally DO SOMETHING about all this, whatever "all this" may be. But a god who would manipulate everyone and everything to anyone's given idea of what should be, is not the living, loving God we know. The God who loves us is the God of resurrection, the God who redeems everything. Our God does not manipulate, our God incarnates. God incarnated in Jesus and God incarnates in us too. In you and in me. WE are God's chosen dwelling place, the hands and heart and face of Christ in the world. And rather than step away when things get uncomfortable, our job is to lean in.

There will be storms in our lives... there always are. Life can be going along just fine, and all of a sudden the sky darkens, the wind changes, the waves begin to whip our little boats around and we find ourselves tossed into a full-tilt panic. When our lives are turned upside down by a tragic accident, the onset of a grave illness, a lost job, a spouse who has been unfaithful, a child who has gone distant, an aging parent making poor decisions, the death of someone we love ... when those storms hit and fear takes over, it can be tempting to call God into question.

Do you not care that we are perishing?

That might not be the right question. Storms are the stuff of real life, if we live long enough, and real life is going to happen to us and to the people we love. The truth is, it can be very scary out there. Jesus didn't say "There is nothing to be afraid of." He said "Why are you afraid?" There is a big difference between those two statements... do you hear it? There are lots of scary things in the world, and we actually can't protect ourselves from some of them no matter how hard we try. No matter how hard we work to try to keep the scary stuff at bay, the reality is that we are fragile and tender and vulnerable beings. And sometimes terrible, terrible things happen to us or to the people we love. God knows that. It's why Jesus didn't say "there is nothing to fear,"

but instead asked the disciples *“Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”* It seems like Jesus is saying you’re afraid because you don’t have faith. I’ve often thought that to be afraid is to be unfaithful. But I don’t think Jesus is equating fear with a lack of faith. I become most afraid when parts of my life feel wildly out of control - I think that’s true for many of us. We may work hard to arrange our lives and our circumstances so that we have the illusion of control. We may even try to legislate safety and certainty, but the truth is, we aren’t in control. So if fear has to do with things being too far out of our control, then it seems to me that the faithful response is surrender. Fear can only be quelled by surrender. Not by manning up, but by its opposite. Surrender. Isn’t that always what Jesus is teaching? The last shall be first. You must lose your life to gain it. And the antidote to fear is surrender rather than control.

This doesn’t mean we can’t be brave and courageous and strong in the face of scary stuff. Surrender doesn’t mean abdication. Surrender means we stop blaming others and stop trying to control our circumstances. It isn’t so much that faith takes away our fear. I think what Jesus is saying is that our faith tells us how to be in the face of fear. And while *“Do you not care that we are perishing?”* might seem like a reasonable question of a miracle worker who isn’t working miracles when they’re needed, *“Do you not care that we are perishing?”* is a very different response to fear than *“We are afraid and so we have come to you...”*

You see, when we recognize who Jesus is, we don’t actually need to be so afraid. If we could just remember that the God of every ocean and star and dragonfly and songbird and child, the God of everything that ever was or is or is to come, the God who knows every single hair on our heads and everyone else’s too, the God whose name is Love ... if we could just remember that this is the God who is in the boat with us, maybe we wouldn’t have to be so afraid. I am quite sure that if we really did recognize Jesus for who he is, we would know we could surrender to the redeeming power of his love. *“Have you still no faith?”* doesn’t mean *“Why aren’t you believing hard enough?”* It means *“You can trust me. I am God. I am here. I love you. I will never abandon you. Ever.”* Wishing the storms away won’t save us. Jesus never promised smooth sailing, quite the opposite. But when we’re sinking in fear or panic or despair, the only thing that will rescue us is Love.

We can choose to live as though the God of Love were the one true thing, or we can choose to live in fear. We can choose to come together in love or to separate and isolate. We can choose to let Christ’s love and light shine through us, comforting one another and reminding each other that we are God’s own beloved, or we can turn away. We can say to one another *“Do not be afraid,”* and mean it. Or not. Every one of those choices matters. And one by one, little by little, every single one of our choices changes the world. We do well to consider our choices carefully. *Amen.*