

THE WORD FROM GILEAD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
August 9, 2020; 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

SCRIPTURE READING

Matthew 14:22-34

²² Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³ And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴ but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵ And early in the morning Jesus came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶ But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. ²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

²⁸ Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." ²⁹ Jesus said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" ³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You have so little faith! Why did you doubt?" ³² When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³ And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

SERMON

"Getting the Power Back"

Rev. Martin McGeachy

In my white Wonder Bread upbringing in suburban Tennessee, I never heard the name "Isaias" until about two weeks ago, but boy, I know it now—as the name of a storm. And what a storm. At various times, meteorologists tell us, starting out off the coast of Africa, it was a tropical wave, a tropical storm, and a hurricane as it roared across the ocean, the Bahamas, and the East Coast of the United States; and finally, it became an "extratropical cyclone," another name I never heard before, before it calmed down in Quebec. It spawned numerous tornados, and eighteen people died throughout its onslaught; and here in the Northeast, where I live, millions lost power. I was lucky, only out for 24 hours, but some are still powerless, five days later.

The raging of a storm is a terror we all have to go through sometimes, and often they are weather-storms. Often, though, they are storms of another kind. They may be pandemics, or political firestorms, economic devastations, inequalities that engulf a people in pain and danger... We may face storms of physical disease or slow decline. And the storms may not even have any external symptoms. Our storms may be in our minds and hearts, as we struggle with relationships, faith, loss and life.

I heard a variety of storm survival stories this week, some exciting, some frightening, but most of us around here had, or are having, a similar story—sitting in our houses in the quiet, the hum of the a/c and the refrigerator silent, imagining the extent of the spoilage in the freezer, eating melted ice cream by candlelight for supper, and wondering if 8:30 is too early to go to bed. I remember my sister telling me some years ago that they were having a party once when the power went out, and the gang hung out for a few minutes to see if it would return, but slowly headed home, and Liz and her

husband Tim went to bed, only to be rudely awakened at three a.m. by a sudden flood of lights and loud party music that had been reignited by the electricity.

For me, the loss of power is usually a time of forced self-reflection, usually overdue, and time to meditate—whether I want to or not. Once again, I didn't pick today's Gospel lesson; it picked me. My cycle of readings came up with Jesus walking across the stormy winds to the disciples beset by waves in the boat, and inviting Peter to go for a walk. Can you imagine? Neither could Peter, and when his imagination failed him, he sank. Like many of you, as we have together in our little boat called the earth tried to row to shore in the storm of COVID, division and anger that marks 2020, I feel like my efforts are blowing me further from shore. There is much work to be done, and I'm trying really hard, but what am I relying on? New technology, Wi-Fi, Internet, Zoom, the old tech of telephone... meeting after meeting about what to do, how to be safe, how to feed the hungry, how to reach out...

And then the power goes out. Light the candles and reassess. Wait, be patient in the sweltering heat and isolation. Meditate, pray. My dogs always whine when there's a power failure. I don't know if they sense the loss of some constant electrical current, or the sounds of the world they know that cease, or if they pick up on my unease. But you know how in a movie there's a calm in the action and the hero or heroine, says, "It's quiet... too quiet." Yeah. ALL of the power I rely on has STOPPED. I'm with the dogs. I whine, too.

I've lost my reliance on all the things, the stuff of the world that keep me powered. And I think, no wonder we're all so stressed all the time! We're kept afloat in the waves by artificial junk. Of course we can't row out of the wind. That power is fleeting, as Isaiah reminded us.

Then the other universal we all share is when we get power back. The sense of relief! We want to applaud whoever flipped that switch, like we do sometimes on an airplane when the captain lands us after a bumpy flight. Once I took coffee out to electrical technicians on the pole across the street as they toiled in a snowstorm to get us going again. Essential workers. Thank God for them!

And I think most people go right back to the lives they had before, grateful for a moment that it's all over, and all done. But we have an opportunity. To keep meditating on how we can walk on water. Because the message is clear—true power comes not from the electric company, essential as it is in this day and age. Whatever storms threaten us, the only way to calm the waves and wind, and receive power to row out, comes from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Losing our electricity is a wonderful time to ruminate on the difference between the peace of knowing that God Is, and that the Fridge Is. What are we counting on to power us?

The world is where the storms come from, and they will keep a'comin'. Next time it will be Hurricane Clarisi, or a diagnosis of cancer, or a child in crisis. And if our only power comes from the source of the storm, we will sink. In our Bible story today, notice

that the winds cease when Jesus gets in the boat. There they are, in the same boat, struggling, and he glides along on top of the waves, and when he's with them, together they can do anything, even walk on water. What could we do together if we stopped relying on lithium batteries and worked to recharge our spiritual batteries? Staying higher-powered is what keeps us going to do the work of the world. To row in the wind. And we can do it together.

The familiar story of the feeding of the 5000 immediately precedes this passage, and the structure of the miracle is similar. Again, Jesus is with his disciples. And while he guides them, tells them what to do, they are the ones to do it. They follow his instructions, and the actual manifestation of distributing the miracle of abundance into the crowd comes from the disciples, together feeding his people.

But, in between the miracles, Jesus goes off alone to pray—because Jesus our brother also has to tap into the power—He's not a magic being, but a spiritual one in an earthly vessel. His power for miracles was his ability to channel the Divine.

We're not Jesus, but we're also spiritual beings in earthly vessels—2 Corinthians 4:7 says it is like we carry a treasure in clay jars, so that it's clear our extraordinary power belongs to God and doesn't come from us. And like Jesus, we also have the ability to channel the Divine, to go off in prayer. We don't have to wait for the lights to go out. For the last five days, since the lights came back, I've been in a state of gratitude for all I have, instead of feverishly working to create a different reality. Choosing gratitude, which is a state of constant prayer, can create a self-sustaining energy. We don't even have to feel it right away to begin tapping into it—it works just by plugging into the power source. Robert Emmons, professor of Positive Psychology, puts it like this:

“We can be grateful even if we don't feel grateful. It is under these conditions where we have the most to gain by a grateful perspective on life. In the face of demoralization, gratitude has the power to energize. In the face of brokenness, gratitude has the power to heal. In the face of despair, gratitude has the power to bring hope.” “Gratitude directs our minds to the vast oceans of realities not visible.”

(<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hope-resilience/201911/the-science-gratitude>)

The hymn “Eternal Father, Strong to Save” is one many of us know as the Navy hymn, and we often sing it on patriotic occasions, praying for the safety of those in peril on the sea. It was written by William Whiting in 1860. He had grown up in England, near the coast, and as a young man survived a perilous voyage aboard ship in a storm. Whiting felt that it was God's providence that spared him, and he developed a deep faith in God's sovereignty over both the tranquility and tempestuous power of the ocean. Years later, Whiting wrote the hymn for a student of his who was frightened by an upcoming ocean voyage, to “anchor his faith.” The lyrics may have been inspired by this reading from Psalm 107:

²³ Some went down to the sea in ships,
plying their trade across the ocean;

- ²⁴ they saw the deeds of the Almighty,
the wonders that God works in the deep.
- ²⁵ God spoke and raised the stormy wind,
lashing up the towering waves.
- ²⁶ They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths;
their courage melted away in their calamity;
- ²⁷ they reeled and staggered like drunkards,
with all their skill adrift.
- ²⁸ Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,
and God brought them out from their distress;
- ²⁹ reducing the storm to a whisper,
until the waves of the sea were hushed.
- ³⁰ Then they were overjoyed with the calm;
they were brought safe to their desired haven.
- ³¹ Let them thank God for this great love,
for the wonderful works done for all people.

We hear the echo of that Psalm in the original final verse of “Eternal Father”:
*O Trinity of love and power! Our constant shield in danger's hour;
From rock and tempest, fire and foe, Protect us wheresoe'er we go;
Thus evermore shall rise to Thee Glad hymns of praise from land and sea.*

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eternal_Father,_Strong_to_Save

I told you that I had never heard the name “Isaias” before last week, when the storm roared in. At first, the reporters and weather forecasters kept calling it “Isaiah,” because they didn’t know the Spanish pronunciation, either. And it is a derivation of the Hebrew name “Isaiah,” and when I looked it up, I found, to my surprise and delight, that “Isaias” means “God is my salvation.” Think about that in light of this terrible storm. It’s a light shining in the eye of a hurricane. I’m not suggesting that Isaias was a catastrophe sent by God to teach us a lesson, and decimate the lives of thousands. But in that storm is an opportunity, a light, as in every storm we go through—an invitation to remember the name. GOD is my salvation.

A job coach once asked me when I do my best work, and I realized it was those moments of peace and clarity when I’m feeling faithful, free of fear, stress and anxiety. At those times, I know who I am—a beloved child of the all-powerful God of love. In those moments, I do great things.

I sometimes have a recurring dream of flying, but it’s like Peter on the waves. In my dream, I begin to glide upward, over the trees, but then I realize that it’s impossible, and I start to sink. I think, “Oh, if I could only let go enough, I would soar!” Let’s work together to let go, and let the Holy Spirit lift and carry us. I believe that with Christ, if we let go enough, become higher powered enough, together our church, our nation, our world, can soar through the wind, dance on the waves and make this a better world.

Amen.