

Wesley United Methodist Church  
Rev. Beverly E Stenmark  
Title: Stepping Out in Faith  
Text: Romans 10:5-15  
Matthew 14:22-33

I had a sermon written for today – a decent one. It was faithful to the scriptures. I think it was comforting; reminding us that in the storms of life God is always with us – God comes to us, just as Jesus came to Peter in the Gospel reading today – reaching out, grabbing hold of us, and preventing us from sinking in the storms of life.

There was only one problem with the sermon – it was a little too generic. It was a little too safe, and I grew more and more uncomfortable with being safe and not addressing the storms that are raging around us right now.

It might be helpful for you to know, that I work very hard to try to keep politics out of worship, out of sermons. I know that persons of faith frequently disagree about many things. I have always seen my responsibility as a pastor not to tell people what to believe about specific issues or what to do, but rather to encourage all of us to be intentional about making sure that it is our faith that influences what we do and the decisions we make. I always encourage us to seek to be faithful in all things.

I believe strongly in a time-honored dictum that John Wesley followed, “In Essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things charity.” That says to me that there are some things about our faith that we should all be able to agree upon but that there are many things about which we may believe and understand differently. In those matters, it is important

that we continue to honor each other, to respect each other and to treat each other as brothers and sisters in Christ.

There have been many pastors and faith leaders who have spoken very clearly about what they believe and do so with great certainty while asserting that they are speaking for God. Often, I have sat back, tried to understand their perspective, and when confronted by them have tried to say that I understand God's word differently. Some have accused me of being apathetic and proclaimed that my silence and the silence of others allows injustice to continue.

Today, I feel that there are some very dangerous storms raging around us, and it is more essential than ever that we learn with Peter how truly critical it is to keep our eyes focused on Jesus. Otherwise we will sink. It is in trying to keep **my** eyes focused on Jesus, that I started to find myself sinking last night – feeling that I was being unfaithful if I didn't at least identify these storms and the dangers we face from them.

Yesterday, we were shocked to hear about the terrible things happening in Charlottesville, Virginia. They were on a larger scale more of what we have seen and heard about on the fringes in too many places recently. As of last evening, there was one person dead, nineteen hospitalized following a car driving into a crowd of people. There were fourteen more people hurt in street brawls. The hate speech that was taking place was about far more than politics. I apologize, but feel I need to share some of what I heard from leaders in the group. David Duke, a Ku Klux Klan leader, said that "European Americans are being ethnically cleansed within our own nation" and called Saturday's events, "the first step toward taking America back." Michael Von Kitch, a self-proclaimed Nazi said, "We are assembled to defend our history, our heritage, and to protect

our race to the last man – We came here to stand up for the white race.” Marchers were chanting, “White Lives Matter. You will not replace us. Jews will not replace us.” I don’t know any way to call this anything other than racism, hatred and bigotry.

I believe strongly that this is so contrary to everything that we, as followers of Christ, profess to believe that it is impossible for us to be silent. I cannot and will not tell you or anyone else what to say or do, because it has so often taken me too long to stand up and take a public stand. For too long, I feel like I have been treading water (and I don’t swim very well), but now I feel that it is time to call out, “Lord, save me.” “Take my hand and help me to walk through the storms.”

Quite frankly friends, it is up to those of us who are white, to be the people who are standing up and saying that we will not tolerate behavior and rhetoric and systems that treat people of color in ways that are demeaning, discriminating, and as people who are less than. People of color have too long been fighting this battle, but it really should not be their battle to fight – it should be ours. I know that this can be done, only when we keep our eyes on Jesus while the wind howls around us and the waves rock our boat.

As horrible as this storm is, I wish it were the only one that is raging around us. We know, all too well, of the heightened tension between our President and the North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. We know that this is a storm that is about far more than two people bullying each other; their actions have ramifications for millions of people around the world. I spent too much time this week talking with my nine-year-old granddaughter and listening to her fears and her thoughts. I watched her draw a political

cartoon in which one peaceful country had an unhappy face because of the actions and rhetoric from these two world leaders.

Friends, sadly, I do not believe that we can say all of this is about politics and has no place in religion. Karl Barth, a great theologian was known for saying, “Take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible.” Preachers must take the events of the world and help to shed the Gospel light upon them.

I think this becomes especially true when religious leaders are doing so and using what I can only identify as “bad theology”. This may be judgmental, and this is my third revision of a sermon written earlier. If I had more time, I might be able to speak more clearly or eloquently, but you are getting my late night and early morning responses today.

This week Texas pastor Robert Jeffress, one of President Trump’s evangelical advisers, said that God has given the president “full control” to take out North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. The First Baptist Dallas pastor wrote that a biblical passage in the book of Romans endowed “rulers full power to use whatever means necessary – including war – to stop evil.”

For those who do not consider themselves to be biblical scholars or who do not spend time studying the Bible, for those who do not spend time seeking God’s guidance, proclamations like this give people more reason to believe that religion is dangerous. For too long, I have stood by while religious leaders like this make the news and bring words that get believed as what Christianity is about. As a believer, as a pastor, I am learning that I cannot be silent when Christ’s name, when the Gospel is being used to promote hatred, violence, injustice, homophobia, bigotry, and racism.

We are all too familiar with the storms around health care, education, immigration, sexual orientation, gender identification, the environment,

taxation, etc etc. It would be so very easy for us to become overwhelmed by these storms. It would be so very easy for us to turn inward and think only of ourselves. It would be so very easy for us to board up our windows like we might do for a hurricane, tune out and try to ride out the storm ignoring what is happening around us.

In the midst of all this, the Gospel for today shows the disciples caught in a storm – one of those sudden storms that arises on the Sea of Galilee. After what must have been an uplifting and high experience of being part of the miracle of feeding well over 5,000 people with only five small loaves and two fish – the disciples are out in the boat alone. Jesus had sent them out, and he had gone off by himself to pray.

Well into the night – while they were being blown about on the sea – they saw something coming toward them – something they couldn't identify, something that might have been a ghost. Then they heard the familiar voice of Jesus – speaking to them through the storm, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

In the middle of the storm, it can be great comfort to hear that familiar voice. We face many different kinds of storms in our lives as individuals and as a community. Sometimes the storm comes when the doctor speaks the words we are dreading. Sometimes the storm comes when our boss tells us that we are no longer employed. Sometimes the storm comes when a loved one leaves, or dies or we feel we have been betrayed.

There are many kinds of storms. What they often have in common are those many feelings that go with them; feelings of helplessness, fear, anxiety, sadness. In the middle of the storm, whatever kind of storm it is, when we don't know what to do, when we are feeling buffeted and everything seems to be beyond our control – that voice of peace comes to

us, “Do not be afraid. I am with you.” It doesn’t stop the storm – the wind may continue to howl; the waves continue to rock, but we are not alone. We are not left alone to face whatever the storms are because Jesus is there with us. We may find ourselves in that peaceful eye of the storm where we have time to breathe and look around.

When Peter heard Jesus’ voice, he proclaimed, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” Jesus said, “Come.” So, Peter got out of the boat and started walking on the water and came toward Jesus. All was well, for a short time. I have always liked Peter because he is so real. Peter often gets billed as Jesus’ right-hand man. He and his brother Andrew were likely the first apostles called by Jesus to follow him – and they immediately left their fishing boats and everything behind to follow Jesus. The Roman Catholic Church identifies Peter as the first Bishop of Rome and proclaims that all the Popes are the successors of Peter.

Peter was the first to proclaim that Jesus was the Son of God – but Peter was also impetuous, quick to act first and think later. Peter was frequently putting his foot in his mouth. When Jesus talked about his upcoming death, Peter was quick to rebuke him and tell him not to talk that way. That earned Peter, the famous response from Jesus, “Get behind me Satan”. In other words, “remember who you are and who I am, follow me, don’t try to tempt me.”

Peter came to Jesus walking on the water, but very quickly noticed again the strong wind and became frightened and started to sink. He called out to Jesus, “Lord, save me!” Immediately, Jesus reached out and took hold of Peter and saved him from drowning – just as Jesus does to each of us when the storms threaten to overwhelm us.

Peter was safe as long as he kept his eyes focused on Jesus – but as soon as he looked away – as soon as he paid more attention to the wind and the waves, he started to sink. We can face whatever storm is around us if we keep our eyes firmly focused on Jesus. The wind will continue to howl. The waves will continue to rock. The storm will continue but we will not be facing the storm alone and that presence of Jesus with us may make the storm feel so much less menacing. We may find a peace within us as we face the storms knowing that we do not face them alone.

Sometimes, Jesus calls us to step out of the boat; to go where we had not planned to go. Sometimes Jesus calls us to take a risk, to take a stand, to walk into the storm not knowing what we will face, but knowing that we will not face it alone.

The passage from Romans today reminds us that we are to confess with our lips that Jesus is Lord, and believe in our hearts that Jesus was raised from the dead and goes with us into the storms; then we will be saved. We are to believe and we are to act.

There are times when believing and keeping our mouths shut is not an option. There are times when believing means that we take the risk to speak out – to call racism what it is, to name bigotry when we see it, to speak up when we see injustice, to counter hatred with love.

I like Peter, at least in part because even though he had this incredible experience with Jesus, even though he saw many of the miracles, even though he was so close to Jesus – even then, he was human, he was frail, he made mistakes. On the night when Jesus was betrayed, despite having insisted that he would never desert Jesus and that he was willing to die for him, when confronted by a servant girl he denied

that he even knew who Jesus was. He denied Jesus not once, but three times.

And yet, Jesus did not give up on Peter and Jesus does not give up on any of us. No matter how many times, we may fail to stand up for what is important, no matter how many times we may deny Jesus by keeping our mouths shut – Jesus continues to reach out to us. This gives me hope. It helps me remember that even though I may disappoint Jesus, he does not leave me but continues to call me and invite me to do what is right.

Jesus accepts each of us just the way we are. He loves each of us as we are, but he also gently and consistently invites us to grow – to take a risk, to get out of the boat, to walk on the water, to face the storm, and to do so keeping our eyes firmly fixed on Jesus.