



Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost ***August 9, 2026***

Sermon, the Rev. Dr. David T. Gortner

[Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28](#) [Psalms 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b](#) [Romans 10:5-15](#) [Matthew 14:22-33](#)

Oh God, what a storm we are in now!

Just a week ago, our region was overcome with a very near and present danger of fire that threatened to engulf our area's largest city and continue to spread. In this week, we have seen the fires in and around Spokane completely wipe out over 700 homes, with everything destroyed. We have seen on the news the ways that fire begun from a small start spread in the dry heat and wind, consuming everything in its path, leaping roadways and rivers, and outpacing our ability to extinguish it. The fires are still not entirely contained and there is fear of their reigniting. And thousands of people are now evacuated and displaced, so many now without homes. And now, we have evidence of the raging fire being started in a field of dry grass by a disturbed young man. Small sins, they really can ignite a firestorm.

But, we thank God that the fires have been somewhat contained, that good firebreaks have been created, that firefighters from all over this region and from around the country are here working day and night to contain, beat back, and extinguish this ravaging beast. We thank God for all the leaders and workers and volunteers who directed and have maintained an evacuation that meant everyone lived and most of the animals were rescued or released to flee from harm. We thank God that people have simply showed up ready to offer money, clothes, food, goods, shelter, and medical and psychological care.

In the midst of the storm, people have come together for each other, and people have shown up, and a community mobilized itself to save each other and those in great need. Even while we all are affected by the smoke and unhealthy air from the fire that lingers and swirls around us, we offer prayer and care and support.

In the midst of disaster, turmoil, destruction, and chaos, we discover more of who we really are. The image of the living God within us seeks to flow forth, in direct response to the needs we see. What we know most, in our bones and in the depths of our hearts and minds, comes fully to the surface and overrides our weariness, our defensive postures, our assumptions.

In the midst of this disaster, we are seeing the image of God in how people are helping each other.

There are so many places of disaster, turmoil, destruction, and chaos. There are wars, battles, and threats of war. There are storms, earthquakes, fires, floods. There are cruel and unjust actions in our world by one group against another. There are the storms we have all experienced in our own families, in the workplace, in our neighborhoods, and in our own hearts and minds. In any of these, we often feel taken by surprise, we can feel helpless even as we strive against the waves and torrents. We can circle around and around in an attempt to deal with the situation even though our attempt is not working. In the midst of this, people of good will rush to the scene to help, to rescue, to direct, to restore, to support, to strengthen.

Today, we hear and read of two moments of great storm in our scripture readings. We hear of Joseph who goes to meet his brothers and is overcome by the overwhelming firestorm of their jealous rage, and of the eldest brother's intervention in saving Joseph – and them all - from murder. We hear of Jesus' disciples struggling through the night in a stormy sea to get to the other shore, and of Jesus walking across the sea to find them and bring a stilling and containment of the storm.

What is interesting is that, in both of these situations, someone directs and commands Joseph and the disciples into the path where danger can emerge. Jacob tells his favorite son Joseph to go and check up on his brothers. And then, when Joseph is a bit lost looking for his brothers and the flocks they are tending, across the wide open spaces with a few scattered villages, a mysterious man tells him where they are and points him toward them. At the beginning of our reading from the Gospel of Matthew today, we find that Jesus "made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side while he dismissed the crowds."

The path ahead for Joseph, and the path ahead for the disciples, is not guaranteed as all peaceful pastures and still waters. We are not guaranteed freedom from conflict, crisis, storm, or destruction. But, when we are called, we respond. Where we find ourselves directed or ordered, we go. At the end of John's Gospel, after the risen Jesus appears to his disciples and gently confronts Peter with the repeated question, "Do you love me?" and the directive, "Feed and take care of my sheep," Jesus says to Peter "When you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish." When we follow the Way of Jesus and the urgings of the Holy Spirit, we move into places where there may be great brokenness and great need, and some risk and possible danger.

And Jesus sends the disciples and crowds away so that he can have time alone to restore, rest in God's presence, pray, and be. None of us can operate long on an empty gas tank. We need to refuel and recenter our souls.

Yet, even in the midst of this time of deep quiet, Jesus senses his disciples are in peril. And here is where we receive the image of Jesus walking on the water across the sea to where they are struggling in their boat. I particularly like the art piece I shared with you in our Friday e-news, because of how powerfully it speaks of the situation. Jesus is wind-blown as he presses forward across the churning waves toward the boat carrying the disciples that is far from shore. The boat looks like it is sinking or at least beginning to capsize, and it is heavily waterlogged and in danger.

What strikes me is how Jesus is in motion. He has just finally found time for solitude and prayer, but then he senses that his disciples are in peril. He leaves his retreat and moves. And no barrier deters him. This is a Savior who is on the move. This is another vision of Emmanuel, God-with-us, running like rescue workers toward the danger.



(Engraving by Gustave Dore, 1870)

Storms and perils come in many forms.

We know them, so close to us now in fire.

We know and hear of storms in natural disasters, war or political upheaval, relationships, work, and in our own bodies and minds.

We may even find ourselves facing storms because of paths into which God has led us.

Joseph was overcome by the storm of his brothers' jealous rage in which they had lost all reason. But God's presence was even there, in brother Reuben's rescue of his brother from death, and even in the brothers' turn from murder to selling Joseph off as a slave. Because it was here that Joseph's story could continue. And, Joseph continued to go forward, and to step fully into each new situation in the wild and stormy chapters of his life.

Jesus comes to his disciples in the storm. And Peter, so eager to see Jesus and to be with Jesus (and maybe to be like Jesus), asks for Jesus to command him to leave the boat and walk on the water to meet him. Jesus gives the invitation – again, into greater danger. Peter, so eager, leaves the uncertain security of the storm-tossed boat and moves directly out into the stormy sea. He makes some progress. But then, the reality of the situation gets to him, and he begins to sink into everything that is swirling around him. So then, he cries out to Jesus to save him. And Jesus grasps him with his hand.

Peter's leap into deeper danger - to go toward Jesus - but to leave the boat to go into the seemingly impossible? It seems both bold and foolish, right? This daring move into the chaos, and then sinking down in the powerful swirl of the chaos... we know this experience even in the things we step into and then find the complexity and confusion of it all and say to ourselves, "What have I gotten myself into?"

Peter's experience reminds me of something St. Julian of Norwich wrote. Julian was an amazing teacher and abbess of a religious order in the later Middle Ages, even when she suffered disabling physical infliction. She reflected powerfully on the relationship of God with we little humans that seek to respond rightly to God's call. God speaks an invitation or directive to us. And the willing person, eager to do the will of the beloved Lord, runs out with full force to go and do what God has called, but then not watching closely their steps, falls down into a ditch and gets wounded and unable to get up. And then, the person call for help. And God hears and with love comes to help.

The daring move into the chaos in pursuit of God's good, and the sinking into the chaos, both are ways of meeting Christ. Peter is drawn to the one who has just said to them all, "Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid." Peter is drawn to the one who, like the fire in the burning bush to Moses, says "I am – it is I." And, Peter desires to do what Jesus is doing.

And Christ, the Lord of Life, speaks to Peter as Christ speaks to us: "Take heart - take courage - reach for and draw in heart which is passion and brave readiness. Do not be afraid - let go of and turn away from patterns fear." Jesus says "Take heart" in other places where he is offering healing, cleansing, and forgiveness. Immediately, Jesus grasps Peter's hand.

Friends, "How beautiful are the feet of the One who brings good news."

A fellow pastor here in the area shared that he was reading the book, "Galileo's Daughter." In this book, the author unpacks letters written by Galileo to his daughter during the time of rising conflict with medieval church leaders. He spoke of his concern and worry about what might lie ahead with efforts by the institutional church that conspired to take him down. But he continued to step forward for the sake of truth, steeped deeply in faith and rooted in scripture and committed to the God of truth, stepping into the maelstrom because he would not back down from the truth of his discoveries.

In the past couple weeks, I have had the honor of being with some of our longtime members during some of their final weeks and days alive with us here. Each of them was at peace. Each of them said, "I am ready." Their way of facing death with calm and readiness has reminded me of my father in his last weeks. When he was with us gathered as a family, and I was with him attending closely during those weeks, he spoke of journey he was beginning – he said it was like a boat on a sea, and the journey ahead was not clear, but he trusted the waters and the movement.

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

Let us always pray and look for Christ to come to us in our storms.

And let us join with Christ in walking across barriers toward the perils that others are facing, to bring what help we can and the calming force of the Holy Spirit.