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Texts: Matthew 14: 22-33  
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### Chaos and Trust: Learning to Walk in the Time of Corona

Where now shall we turn for wisdom? Where shall we find the emotional and spiritual resources we need for a time such as this? We've all scrolled the news feeds, dumbfounded by the scale of this crisis. We've read and listened to the think pieces about "social distancing," "flattening the curve," and "sheltering in place," this new lexicon we're now repeating ad nauseum. We've received the memes and photos with encouraging lines or beautiful pictures. As the tide of infections has risen day by day, so too has the tide of electronic messaging. Much of it is helpful, and I don't begrudge any of it. We here at the church have been doing our best to strike the right balance between meaningful new communications and an oversaturation of messaging. Our hope is that what we have to say will come to matter to you as you navigate this unprecedented moment. But the question remains: where shall we turn now for the wisdom we most need?

I wish to suggest two such sources for you, one born from pastoral experience, and the other born from a story from our faith tradition. I'll begin from pastoral experience. Over the last week and a half I've been heartened by the way our community has come together around this crisis, and I've frankly been thrilled at the expressions of creativity and ingenuity that have been happening all around us. My kids figured out ways to share dinners with people via Facetime and Zoom. Musicians are streaming concerts online. People are meeting for walks and for bike rides, and we're all discovering new ways of connecting with one another. I'm grateful for that. Those adaptations are working to keep all of our spirits up, and we'll need to keep finding those creative outlets.

But I've also detected, in myself and in the culture at large, something that for now lies just below the surface. It's something that I believe needs to be named and addressed if we are not to be blindsided by its aftershocks. And that has to do with grief and mourning, for in one way or another, that is what we're collectively experiencing right now. In the space of a week and a half, we've undergone a mass mobilization that has required enormous shifts in our lives, and as that took place, the foundations of the earth itself have seemed to tremble. We've all of us been forced to say goodbye to a lot of the things we depend upon for our sense of well being, things we tend to take for granted in our ordinary lives. Shall we name a few of them? Our kids have given up school, and playing with their friends. Many of us have given up going to work and seeing colleagues. Some of us are losing paychecks, and there's fear among many that they'll lose employment altogether or that their business will collapse. We've lost our mobility. We've lost the ability to gather for worship. Perhaps most poignantly of all, we've even lost the ability to touch. Forget for the time being the fear of what may yet come. I'll speak to that in a moment. Just consider for now the emotional cost of what we've so suddenly lost.

It's a truism in therapy and pastoral care alike that there are stages of grief and mourning, beginning with shock and denial, then moving through anger and bargaining, sometimes falling into a trough of depression and then finally moving into a kind of acceptance. It's not a linear progression, nor does it apply to everyone in the same way. But generally, when we lose things we love, we tend to go through variations upon that cycle. And right now, we're seeing it played out on a massive, global scale. How many of us still hover in a kind of shock and denial about all that's happening around us? I haven't seen anger just yet, but I know I've seen and felt bargaining. You know what I mean – maybe if I buy out all the spinach and kale from the Big Y right now I can ward this thing off. Many of us have managed a brave and stoic acceptance, though I also suspect that in time, we'll need to address the depression that will inevitably seep in for some of us. The thing is, right now, the entire world is living through each of those stages in the cycle of grief all at once. It makes some of us manic. It makes some of us tired. It makes some of us want to hide. It makes some of us want to busy ourselves and just keep moving. Those are all valid and true responses. If violence is unexpressed and unexamined grief, then we must become adept at naming the loss that we feel, the better to understand and respond to it. Because the violence of xenophobia and scapegoating, of suspicion and paranoia, is a powerful temptation and danger right now.

One of the great gifts of the vocation that Laura, Carleen and I practice is the invitation issued by a great many people, including many of you, to walk alongside them – you - in a season of grief. It often has to do with the death of a loved one, but it also involves moments of life transition, when a job ends or an accident occurs or a move takes place. We traffic in hope, yes, but we also traffic in grief, we ministers. And from long experience and observation, we've learned not to fear it. We've learned, just as many of you have learned, to honor and embrace the process of mourning, allowing it to run its course and to have its way with us. It can be a painful thing, but it is also a humanizing process. It can be intensely uncomfortable, but it also has the capacity to open us to one another. It's often a very individual process, but it also has the capacity to bind us into a shared community of those subject to similar frailties and vulnerabilities. It's something we wish to avoid, but it gives us access to a secret country within our hearts, where kindness dwells, where compassion lives, where hope grows, and where resolve and endurance take shape. If all the predictions are accurate, and I believe they are, much will be required of us in the coming days and weeks, even if we are stuck in our homes. Acknowledging and moving through the very real grief underlying this moment will go a long way toward keeping us steady, calm, and poised as we face into the unknown. Which is all a way of saying that if you feel sad, let yourself feel sad. If you feel angry at what you've lost, let yourself be angry. If you feel scared, or anxious, or overwhelmed, let yourself feel those things. Invite those emotions in as friends, partners in a wider conversation that needs to happen right now. And then ready yourself to keep moving, and to do what needs to be done.

So much for pastoral wisdom, such as it is. I'd like now to turn to a story from our faith tradition, one that speaks to our present moment. I believe our sacred stories are going to be lifelines in this time of crisis, and one of the stories we need most is the story in the Gospel of Matthew of Jesus walking on the water. You know it I'm sure. The disciples are in a storm tossed boat, and they see Jesus walking to them across the sea. They realize who it is, and Jesus calls to them. "Take heart. Don't be afraid," he says.

Then Peter asks to join Jesus. Peter climbs out of the boat, and he too walks upon the surface of the water, as if it were stable ground. But soon he panics. He sinks beneath the waves, until Jesus pulls him up, saying to him, “Why did you doubt?”

Here’s why that story is so important for us. The water in the story represents a world in which the ground has given way, where the foundations of the earth have been liquidated, where there’s nothing stable to hold onto. In other words, the water symbolizes a moment of chaos, any chaos. That’s where the disciples live in that moment, no less than we do, when nothing feels quite solid anymore. But then the figure of Jesus emerges, walking steadily upon the face of that chaos. He knows how to remain steady upon a roiling and unstable surface. He knows how to walk through roiling waves when the foundations of the earth no longer will support him. And he speaks to each of us who are storm tossed, saying, “Take heart. Do not be afraid.” What’s more, he gives those who hear that voice the confidence to get out of the boat and to do the very same thing: to walk through and upon that unsteady and unstable surface. Peter tries it, and it works. He loses his nerve for a time, not trusting that indeed, he can be steady on his feet. But Jesus pulls him back up again, and soon, the storm abates.

You and I are on that little craft right now, clinging to whatever might support us – our family and friends, our faith community and whatever inner resources we’ve cultivated. And a voice is coming to us across each wave, trying to reach us, trying to reassure us, saying, “Don’t be afraid.” And that same voice invites us somehow to trust that even though very little feels solid beneath our feet, that we can let go, and maneuver through the storm. Even when there is an abyss beneath our feet that voice steadies us, and says, just trust. Just walk. If you sink for a moment I’ll catch you. Just trust that you can do this. I believe that we have the power to walk upon the very face of the abyss.

I suspect you know that. I suspect many of you have already experienced that dynamic at some point in your life. We know how to do this, and indeed, it might be that we’re doing it already. We’re already walking upon unstable foundations. We’re doing it by remaining calm, and by maintaining the required distance from one another. We’re doing it by building a network of support capable of withstanding the waves that are likely to swell around us. We’re walking upon the abyss by readying ourselves to do what must be done to care for one another. If you know what voice to listen to, if you know where to look, if you know who steadies you, you already know that not only can you ride out this storm, terrified in your little boat. You know that you can walk upon the very face of chaos with confidence, and without sinking.

Feel whatever it is you feel right now. Tend to the emotions that are swirling in your hearts, whatever they might be. But listen for the voice calling through the storm, in whatever way it comes: Take heart. Don’t be afraid. You too have the power to stand, even upon the abyss.

Love in the Time of Corona. Take heart. And be not afraid.