



September 8, 2020

Take Heart; Do Not Be Afraid

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In the well-beloved gospel story from Matthew, Jesus reveals his power to his disciples by walking on the water. Peter, an impetuous risk-taker, calls to Jesus, and attempts to do the same thing, only to be overwhelmed by the power of the waves. Jesus immediately reaches out his hand and takes hold of Peter.

Peter is the rock upon whom the Church was built. And we can wonder if Peter ever looked back at this moment in the terror of the powerful waves to realize that this was his baptismal moment.

I grew up in San Diego where the Pacific Ocean waves are big, loud, and cold. Last summer, I watched a non-denominational church perform baptisms in the Pacific Ocean. As each new Christian was lowered into the water and baptized, they were held – cradled almost – by the strong arms of the pastor.

From my perspective as an Episcopalian, it was a powerful baptism. It almost seemed a little dangerous.

Even now, as we face new challenges in the later part of 2020, it seems that we are in dangerous water.

This COVID-soaked world washes over us. We face not only the deep waters of a health catastrophe, we are also called to address the waves of the injustice of racism, an economic emergency, political division, and an educational crisis.

The familiar anchor of work, family, friends, and school has shifted. We feel adrift.

And, in the midst of all this – the fear of the unknown and of sinking – the message for us to remember is that even in deep, dangerous water, God is always with us, stretching out a hand to lift us up. God is always present reminding us, “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.”

But, right now, we are Peter. We are the Church, learning to be faithful in new ways.

Like Peter, we have the opportunity to face our challenges and allow them to transform us to live in new ways. Of course, this is easier said than done.

I know the feeling of facing down moments of terror in my experience of hearing God’s call to ordained ministry.

The call meant that Curt, my husband, and I quit our career-track jobs. We left our home, family, friends, and beloved parish behind in Memphis. We had to have faith to step outside our comfort zone.

And now, with COVID-19, all of us are facing more uncertainty for what lies ahead. We cope with online meetings and classes; virtual school for the kids; and entirely new ways that we work, visit family, socialize, support each other, and worship.

Somehow, the Holy Spirit is always at work in our lives. I believe that God is present and transforming each of us to step into something totally new. And through it all, God is present as we live into that newness.

We found a brand-new community at Virginia Theological Seminary; a supportive church family at Immanuel; new friends; and a clear, new-found purpose and direction for our lives. Terror transformed.

As the church and as individuals, we know these days are new and different. They feel dangerous. Living out our Baptismal Covenant always is. But it would be a great tragedy if we did not allow the present crises to change us – transform us to live in a new way.

The blessing for us is that all our work we do with God's help. The strong arms of Jesus reach out to us as we step out into new life.

We will regather as church at some point in the future – resume work and school as we used to know it – someday. And we will, as Immanuel Church-on-the-Hill, gather in a circle again to receive Holy Eucharist. And when we do, it will be a celebration. We will be a changed people. Hope, joy, worship, and freedom abide in the hard work of becoming a new creation.