

Sermon: "Take Courage! Don't be Afraid"
Pastor Sam Lovett
August 9, 2020

Friday was a bright bluebird day here in Central New Hampshire. I went for a hike up to the rock-face summit of Mount Chocorua in Tamworth with my mom Eileen and partner, Grace. From the top of Chocorua looking north, you could look up and see the silvery weather observatory equipment gleaming atop Mt. Washington. To the south, you could look down and see Red Hill in Center Harbor, flanked on either side by the gleaming blue waters of Squam Lake and Lake Winnepesaukee. It was too far away to see any boats out there on the water, but the sun was radiant and dancing across the water top, and you just knew that the lakes were abuzz with summer activity.

The gospel reading from today recounts Jesus up on a mountain, looking down from a high vantage point on a body of water below. We're told that Jesus could certainly see the boats on the water, more specifically the boat carrying his disciples that was being bounced and turned about by whipping winds and stormy seas.

This gospel story picks up right where last week's reading about Jesus feeding the 5000 with loaves and fishes leaves off. A lot of my thoughts about this week's scripture reading were informed by the Wednesday morning bible study that we had this week with some people joining by zoom and some coming in over the phone. If anyone wants to join that study and read the Gospel stories together so we can be familiar with them each week before worship, please call the church offices or send me an email!

Jesus was joined in his solitude by the disciples and the multitudes. He is inundated by the crowds who come to him in his solitude, and he cares for them – feeding them and teaching them. But at the beginning of today's reading from Matthews Gospel today, he sends everyone away.

It's a reminder that we need to be intentional about taking time to restore ourselves, mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. After losing a dear friend, and hosting a major event, Jesus is spent. But up there on the mountaintop, he sees his friends in distress and doesn't hesitate to leave his solitude when others are in need. He walks out to them. They mistake him for a ghost in the early-dawn light, and recoil in fear.

Jesus says to them, "Take courage! It's me. Don't be afraid."

If the Bible had a subtitle, it would be some version of the words, "Don't be afraid."

It's said several hundred times, in all different intensities and contexts to truly show that God is always with us. When we are afraid, God is the new dawn and the second chance. When we suffer, God is right there suffering alongside us. Here are a few examples:

Joshua 1

Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”

Isaiah 41

“So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”

Matthew 6

“Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”

Revelation 1

Then he placed his right hand on me and said: “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last.”

When Peter hears Jesus tell him not to be afraid, because he is with him, he’s inspired to ask Jesus to command him to come out onto the water – to do his own walking on water with his faith in Jesus to sustain him.

The unlikely walk is a fixture of faith, and we’ve seen it represented in popular culture and society as well.

Marches from Selma to Montgomery, Gandhi’s Salt Marches in India, the Singing Revolution in the Baltic States. There’s a reason Nelson Mandela in South Africa titled his autobiography, “Long Walk to Freedom.”

The story that most came to mind when thinking about difficult but transformative walks was that of New Hampshire’s “Granny D.”

Born Doris Rollins in Laconia, New Hampshire, “Granny D” is best known for her walk across America in support of campaign finance reform (1999-2000). Her trip, begun shortly before her 89th birthday, lasted 14 months, and covered 3,200 miles.

Granny D’s journey was no mere publicity stunt. She had studied the issue of campaign finance reform so that she could communicate her views, values, and faith in her ability to change the world to the people who assembled to meet her along the way, including the more than 2,000 who greeted her arrival in Washington, D.C.

She spent a year training for the physical challenges she would encounter on the trip, which would wear out four pairs of shoes and included a hundred-mile stretch that she covered on cross-country skis.

Like Peter in the gospels, she felt inspired by the actions of people who had taken to the road before her, and she got out on the road to take a difficult walk to bring people’s attention to the health of democracy and our country.

I'm sure she passed through many stormy days. The symbolism of the storm and of the sea is really important in the gospels. The sea is the symbol of chaos, and the opposite of order. In the midst of this chaos. We're changed in the storm.

When we closed our bible study conversation on Wednesday, we asked whether people were more likely to stay in the boat in their life right now, or to get up and step out of the boat knowing that Jesus sustains them. I'll pause to let you consider that question in your own life right now.

[...]

Why did the disciples cross the sea? Jesus told them to. But why? To get to where there were people who needed to hear the Good News. So, stop worrying about how to walk on water, and get in your boat and get to where the people.