

**Virtual Prayer Service for UCC Westerly et al**

*Sunday, February 16, 2025 – Services at church canceled due to snowstorm, again!*

**GATHERING MUSIC – Instrumental Hymn Prayer Time Music**

[Daffodil Harper. YOU TUBE. No copyright/free download]

**OPENING WORDS & WORDS OF EXPLANATION**

**A READING FROM THE PSALMS – Psalm 1:1-3**

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked,  
Or take the path that sinners tread;  
Or sit in the seat of scoffers.  
But their delight is in the law of the Lord,  
And on his law, they meditate day and night.  
They are like trees planted by streams of water,  
Which yield their fruit in season and their leaves do not wither.  
In all that they do they prosper.

**SONG – Open My Eyes**

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*W&R#480, v. 1*

**RESPONSIVE PRAYER OF REFLECTION**

[from *Calling on God*, p. 280]

O God of love and reconciliation **(repeat)**  
We gather this morning “  
Praying to know your presence among us. “  
Lover of the outcast “  
You establish equity and justice “  
Even when we see no cause for hope. “  
Holy One, we pray that you will give us eyes to see “  
The truth that has been invisible until now. “  
Fill us with that Holy Spirit that transfigured Jesus into our Savior and Christ. “  
Amen.

**SCRIPTURE READING**     *Mark 6:45-52*

Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray.

When evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. When he saw that they were straining at the oars against an adverse wind, he came towards them early in the morning, walking on the sea. He intended to pass them by. But when

they saw him walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost and cried out, for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” Then he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.

### **A FEW THOUGHTS FOR THIS MORNING** – *“Do Not Be Afraid”*

Once again, we find ourselves worshipping virtually instead of together in our beautiful sanctuary. I admit to being disappointed by that! I confess that our Sunday morning time of worship together each week is the moment I reconnect with God in a deeply personal way, one which lifts me up and refreshes me for whatever the week ahead holds. This is true for me whether I am leading worship or participating as a congregant. Sunday is my connection point with God, the time when my loose plug of energy gets reconnected to the source of my being and my energy. So, here we are, not together and yet together. The ability to do this is one gift the Covid years gave us and I am grateful for this even as I acknowledge it is most definitely NOT the same as being together in our uniquely beautiful sanctuary.

Some of us met virtually yesterday morning as well for our *Threshold Gathering 2.0* on Zoom. It was a great conversation about unexpected possibilities out there for our little church moving forward in the future. You’ll hear more about the specifics of that conversation in the days and weeks ahead. For right now, suffice to say our future remains as promising and exciting as ever. However, even as we talked yesterday the anxiety which pervades our minds and our lives these days was tangible. How much are our lives going to change as the ground shifts under our feet from actions taken by people 500 miles away in our nation’s capital? What is happening and how will it affect us now, and in the weeks and months ahead? Given this new reality when so much is uncertain, how much risk is too much especially for a little church like ours? Honestly, no one can answer that question. Yesterday we came to that conclusion and yet we did figure out how to keep moving forward tentatively and hopefully into new possibilities.

That wonderful conversation yesterday is why I decided to reflect back on one of the stories about Jesus that we know so well – when Jesus walked on the water. This story appears in two of the Gospels – Matthew and Mark. The stories are similar in both Gospels, but they are not identical, as is so often the case when we read Jesus stories recounted in multiple versions. I chose the Mark version for today because I admire Mark’s simple “just the facts ma’am” approach. In his re-telling of Jesus’ life, Mark places this story just after the story we know as “the loaves and fishes.” Typically, he notes “immediately” as the time frame for when all this takes place. In this case, the crowds are just dispersing after their miraculous supper of fish and bread when Jesus tells the disciples to go ahead of him to Bethsaida by boat. He stays behind so he can have some quiet time alone with his own thoughts and with God. This is significant because it tells us Jesus was fully aware of the impact of his miraculous actions, so much

so that even he needed time to process what had just happened. He needed time to mull things over in his heart and his thoughts reconnecting with God, the source of all he was doing, in the process. I love the image this text paints of Jesus standing on the shore as the sun begins to drop lower in the sky, waiving to the disciples now out in the boat rowing to Bethsaida. Then Jesus makes his way up the hill to just be in God's presence. As evening was coming on, he realized he needed to get going and catch up to the disciples.

This is an interesting point of the story for me. I always wonder if Jesus had always planned to catch up to them by walking on the water, knowing full well it would scare the heck out of the disciples? Or, had he initially planned on some other means of getting to Bethsaida by morning? Like perhaps getting someone with another boat to take him or maybe even enjoying the long walk on shore by himself? We just don't know but it's worth asking and it's a question we don't usually even consider. If he had planned another way of reaching Bethsaida, then Mark's description of the moment Jesus decided to walk out to them becomes even more noteworthy because it was spontaneous and not planned. Mark tells us that Jesus noticed the disciples were straining on the oars because an "adverse wind" had come up meaning they weren't making much progress in their journey to Bethsaida. So, what does Jesus do? He reacts as only he was capable of and starts to walk out to the boat.

This moment to me is a perfect example of when Jesus' humanity and his divinity are both clearly visible. The human part of Jesus saw his friends whom he loved in trouble and reacted, to quote Mark, "immediately." He didn't think. He just did. And what he did was to walk on the water to reach them as quickly as possible. But then Mark says something interesting and quite confusing, if we're honest. Mark says that Jesus actually intended to walk right by the boat where his friends were seemingly in trouble. Say what now? Why would Jesus react to the situation as he did only to walk right by the boat? He didn't walk right by the boat, as the text tells us. He tells the terrified disciples who have seen him walking on the water like a ghost not to be afraid because it is him. In a noticeable difference from Matthew's version of this story, Peter does not call out to Jesus to allow him to walk on water coming out to meet Jesus. Nope, after telling us Jesus was just going to keep on walking right past the boat, Mark says Jesus gets into the boat instead and as soon as he sits down, the wind ceases and they are able to move forward to Bethsaida in calm waters.

So what's up with this? If Jesus was worried enough about his friends to walk out to them on water, why would Mark assume he was just going to walk right by them? That, dear ones, is a legitimate question. And why does Matthew's version include this whole story about Peter attempting to walk on the water to Jesus and failing to do so? Well, it seems to me they are both two different ways of highlighting the same lesson we are to take from both versions of this story. This story is all about faith: Who professes it compared with who really has it and lives it. In Mark's version, he says Jesus intended to pass them by as they wallowed in the boat in the wind and waves. So what did the

disciples do? They called out to him, even though they were terrified that Jesus at this moment was some sort of supernatural apparition. They overcame their fear long enough to call out to him and he immediately responded and how did he respond? He spoke out to them “immediately” saying “Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid.” Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid. Then Jesus got into the boat and the wind ceased.

Matthew approaches this issue of insufficient faith through Peter who wants to show everybody – the other disciples and Jesus – that he can walk on water too. So he asks Jesus to command him to come to him on the water and Jesus responds “come.” So Peter gets out of the boat and starts to walk on the water but soon starts to sink when he focuses on the wind and the waves instead of Jesus. Jesus reaches out a hand to the now floundering Peter and says, rather harshly if we’re honest, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” Then both Peter and Jesus make it back to the boat and get in.

Two different versions of the same story, both with the same message: Have faith in Jesus that he loves you and wants only the best for you. Have faith in Jesus sufficient to allow him to ease your fears about whatever has you frightened so that your life can move forward, especially in moments that are really unexpected and scary. Moments just like the ones we are living through right now in this country we so love, dear ones. Even if we want to ease our fears by limiting our exposure to the stormy realities captured in the news, we can’t. Not really. Not for long. We know key government employees are being laid off and our hearts ache for them and their families. We hear stories of ICE raids at homes, at schools and even churches and we shudder. We go to the grocery store and see prices continuing to creep up. We know our LGBTQ+ friends and family are genuinely frightened and so they should be.

We then, dear ones, are left to consider this story – both versions – and ponder what it has to say to us in these fearful days when we feel like our own boats are being swamped in ways we never expected or anticipated. Well, I think it teaches us several things. First, sometimes we are right to be afraid. When it feels like the storms are going to sink your boat it only makes sense to be afraid. It’s not a time to grandstand your faith. It is a time to acknowledge your own weakness because in such weakness God is still there, sure and steady – rock solid in the midst of shifting sand. And that, dear ones, is the second lesson this teaches us on multiple levels and that is to ask for help. In fact it is an even stronger message than that. It teaches us *not to be afraid* to ask for help. The disciples needed help both from the storm they were battling and for escape from their own fears which were holding them captive in despair. Dear ones, we must never forget that God created humans with the capacity to ask for help when it is needed. But this gift comes with a string attached. We must ask for that help. We must ask for that help to name our fears and confront them. We must ask for help to push back against those fears which can be incapacitating.

Dear ones, we must find the courage within ourselves to ask for help when we’re afraid and overwhelmed and when we do, we will receive it. This story both Mark and Matthew share with us is, in the final analysis, all about this simple fact. When we ask

for help from God, we will receive it. Now, will it be the kind of help we want? Possibly not. There are no guarantees as to what God's response to your cries for help will be. God is not in the business of fulfilling commands or wishes from anyone. Jesus is not some sort of cosmic eraser who magically makes all your worries, fears and troubles disappear. Nope. Instead asking God and Jesus for help does something much more powerful, much more incredible – our requests for God's help, God's presence in our lives in these moments when we are most afraid, most vulnerable – these prayers change us. They transform us from lonely, fearful individuals into a community of the faithful which transcends time and space, confident that we are never alone – God is always with us. God provides us with both comfort in fear and strength in how we respond to that fear. So, dear ones, on this stormy, windy day know that Jesus is walking right toward you ready to reach back when you reach out to him. And you already know what he will say: "Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid." Yes Jesus. Thank you. Amen.

### **MORNING PRAYERS**

Silence

Pastoral Prayer

Lord's Prayer

### **CLOSING PRAYER** [adapted from *The Iona Prayerbook*]

Almighty God, Creator of the universe, as a new week begins, we acknowledge that we feel helpless in the face of our world's suffering. Yet in this moment we offer back to you the only things we can – our ordinary, every day lives. We ask you to take our lives into your hands that we may be used to bring even a flicker of hope and justice into your world. May each of us burn like a candle holding the darkness at bay, and not just today, Lord, but through all the days to come. May we approach each day and each night enfolded by and moving ahead through your Holy Spirit. Amen.

### **ANNOUNCEMENTS**

- *Collection of cash donations for CA Wildfire Disaster Relief through CWS received through the end of this month.*
- *Trustees meet on Tuesday; BOOKS meets on Wednesday*
- *Soup Supper on Friday, February 28 @ 6pm.*

***GO IN PEACE, DEAR ONES, TO LOVE AND SERVE THE LORD OUR GOD.  
MAY THE PEACE OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST BE WITH YOU THIS DAY  
AND FOREVERMORE. AMEN.***