

Psalm 85:8-13

85:8 Let me hear what God the LORD will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.

85:9 Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land.

85:10 Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other.

85:11 Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky.

85:12 The LORD will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase.

85:13 Righteousness will go before him, and will make a path for his steps.

Romans 10:5-15

10:5 Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that "the person who does these things will live by them."

10:6 But the righteousness that comes from faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down)

10:7 "or 'Who will descend into the abyss?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).

10:8 But what does it say? "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim);

10:9 because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

10:10 For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.

10:11 The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame."

10:12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him.

10:13 For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

10:14 But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?

10:15 And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

Matthew 14:22-33

14:22 Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds.

14:23 And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone,

14:24 but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them.

14:25 And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea.

14:26 But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear.

14:27 But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

14:28 Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."

14:29 He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.

14:30 But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!"

14:31 Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

14:32 When they got into the boat, the wind ceased.

14:33 And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Sermon message for August 9, 2020  
Pleasant Street and St. Luke's UMCs

This week we look at the famous passage of Peter walking out on the water to meet Jesus.

I think it's appropriate that the Psalm reading for today begins with these words: "Let me hear what God the Lord will speak." Let's listen today, for God's voice above the clamor of wind and waves. We just might hear Jesus speak these words: "Take heart! It is I. Fear not."

This passage is an awesome reminder that Jesus saves in concrete circumstances, in real time, meeting real needs, right here on earth. Jesus calls us to trust him, and he saves us out of chaos and despair.

The Bible never ceases to inspire and amaze. Every story, every passage, every verse, each word just bursts with significance, brimming over with the wisdom of God to navigate this life. A mere scratch of the surface of these texts unearths treasure troves of deeper layers: layers of poetry and history, of memory and melancholy, of tragedy and calamity, of soul and Spirit, and mystery. The Bible tells of the great longing of God's people for God's Reign to be known in this troubled and turbulent world - and the great story of God's passionate pursuit to know and be known by the human heart. But what most intrigues me about the Bible is God's invitation to take part in this great story of salvation, redemption, healing, and perfect love that is God's will and way in the world. These stories invite all of us, invite you, invite me to take part in the Great Story of God's Good News: God's Word of Peace to a turbulent world, through His Son Jesus the Christ.

Let's dig in. Jesus' walking out over the waters to the disciples echoes the creation narrative's account in Genesis, of the Spirit of God that hovers over the primordial waters before the dawn of time. It also recalls the dove that Noah sends out to find dry land after the flood, that same dove which brings back an olive branch, both symbols of divine peace. Jesus walks out over the waters and meets the disciples in the midst of the chaos of the winds and churning waters. As fishermen, the disciples' boat was their livelihood, their means of stability on this earth; the boat provided purpose, meaningful work, and the financial stability to provide for their families. The boat is a familiar place to these fishermen. At this moment, though, the winds are against them, and they are straining at the oars. Jesus comes out to them in the middle of the night, but they don't recognize him there, and think he is a ghost. Their fear blinds them and they don't see him for who he is. Remarkably, the first instance of the word "afraid" in the Bible is

Adam's reply to God in Genesis 3. "[Adam] said [to God] 'I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.'" Who has not experienced fear, or felt the grip of being afraid? We often hide from God in our fear and sin, or, as in this story, we don't recognize God in the chaos of the wind and waves. Immediately, though, Jesus calls out to the twelve with these words:

"Take heart." Similarly, Psalm 27, a lament, ends with these words, "Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord." Jesus also uses this expression in the book of John, when he says to the disciples, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world!"

Are the winds and waves overwhelming you in your boat today? Are you saddened and disturbed by all the news, by the strangeness and distress of these times we are living? Jesus is reaching out to you with a message of peace in that chaos; consider yourself called to walk out to the peace that only God can bring.

The next words Jesus says are, "It is I." Though I do not read Greek, to know this text in its original language, from what those who do read Greek say, Jesus' word here, after "Take heart!" is "I am." Here Jesus directly identifies himself as YHWH, God of Israel and the Old Testament: "I am." These are God's words to Moses when he is sent to free the Israelites from bondage in Egypt: "I am who I am." Moses is to say to the Israelites: "I am has sent me to you."

The next words in the passage are "Do not be afraid." These are the same words from heaven the angel brought to Mary, Jesus' mother, when she first learned that she would conceive, the same words the heavenly emissary brings to Joseph, Jesus' stepfather, and the same words of the angels who met the shepherds near Bethlehem: "Fear not!" The abiding

word from heaven to us on earth is, “Fear not!” Perfect love casts out all fear, and God in Jesus the Messiah offers us that perfect love.

Peter’s walking out to Jesus in trust speaks of the New Creation, of human beings moving out to God by faith and trust in God’s word. Psalm 85 from our reading today states: “Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky.” Human beings were created from the ground, from dust, and here the dust (in the form of Peter) springs up in faithfulness to meet the righteousness of heaven, in Jesus. This is a cooperative act, it is a second birth beyond the natural to supernatural possibilities and purposes, made possible through trust in the Holy Spirit. God speaks to us from the wind and waters, from the midst of the chaos, and we step out in faith to meet God, trusting in God’s faithfulness by that word of encouragement, hope, and perfect love. This is belief that trusts. It is belief that abides and abounds in the heart, grounded in love; not an intellectual kind of knowledge that has the right answer for tests, or an agreement with doctrinal statements. This is the sort of belief that walks out on the water fearlessly, because it is Jesus out there, saying “Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid.” Peter knows Jesus, he knows Jesus knows him, and so he trusts him.

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The bishop invites all the clergy of the conference to share their call story with their congregations each year. Today I would like to take him up on that invitation in the context of this passage, where Jesus calls to the disciples from the wind and the waves, to share a bit of the specifics of how God has called me to this work of pastoral ministry and preaching.

From my earliest weeks on earth, my mom and dad instilled in me a love for prayer, since they would take me to their weekly prayer group, which met at church. This is what John Wesley would call prevenient grace, a grace that I did not choose to receive and could not even have fully understood, but which nonetheless was ministering God’s goodness powerfully into my life. I learned from my parents, even in those earliest

days, an abiding practice of silent prayer, and a love for resting quietly in God's presence that has held me in good stead ever since. I also learned the stories of the Bible in church, and when I would read them from time to time, I found that there was a mysterious quality to Jesus' teachings and to the narratives that always tugged at me, unsettled me and sometimes even angered me. By my early twenties though, I regarded Jesus as a great prophet or teacher, but by that time I had come to believe that all those claims to divinity were the work of an early church trying to make sense of his death and spiritualizing his life, probably for political ends. In other words, the church had put words in Jesus' mouth, or so I believed at the time, so I balked at the notion that this man who had walked in Galilee some two thousand years ago had also claimed to be Lord and Son of God. My religious studies classes in college reinforced this way of seeing things, casting doubt on Jesus' authority, which was convenient for me then, too, since I was committed to "having fun," and what I thought it meant to "live life to its fullest." I picked and chose the verses that I liked from Jesus' teachings, leaving the unsettling or challenging things he said right there on the page, and trying to go and do my thing. While I was earnest in my pursuit to "truly live," I was also misguided and lost, and inevitably I gave in to sinful, destructive behaviors that I knew were wrong, hurting others and myself in the process. Sex outside the context of marriage is sin. Religious hypocrisy is sin. What I did not understand then was that through my sinful behavior I was also hurting God's heart. God wants so much more for us than we can ever comprehend! And it pains God to see us choose the fleeting pleasures of this life and self-centered existence over his ways, eating the mud pies of this earth when heaven's banquet is so grand! But I'm getting ahead of myself.

There were a few verses that had always captivated me, among Jesus' teachings. This was God's way of calling me out of my little boat to walk on water at that time, with him. On sending the disciples out to minister in his name, Jesus tells them that they should trust in God the Father to take care of their every need, and not even carry money or an extra bag for the

journey. This commissioning from God had always fascinated me, along with Jesus' command against worrying over the things of life, like what to eat and what to wear. These instructions appealed to my sense of adventure, so I set about to take Jesus up on his challenge, in my limited way. During my year-long stay in Argentina for study abroad, nearly twenty years ago, summer break was from mid-December through March, so I set out with a backpack and tent, a map, and a determination that the only plan would be God's plan. I would trust God with this journey. A few bus trips, some hitchhiking, and a ferryboat ride later, God took me to the Patagonian Andes of Chile and Argentina. Was God's plan ever glorious, and so much better than anything I could ever have imagined! At every turn, and through the people I met, God met me with radical kindness, hospitality, generosity, incredible coincidences (that were not coincidences) and joy, radiant, exuberant joy. With God leading the way, Chilean mountaineers I happened upon along a trail invited me to scale a volcano with them, Argentine travelers made extra space in their car for me to see an incredible glacier, one of them riding with a big cooler on his lap so I could take the back seat, and one day, when I had set out to go in one direction, a chance encounter turned me right around and two days later I had met two other travelers from the same small college I attended back home in the States, and this after hiking for a whole day without seeing anyone else at all, in the entire reserve. In no way could I have ever manufactured or planned any of the scenarios I was living: mountain peaks, calving glaciers, majestic waterfalls, old-growth forests, hummingbirds, turquoise blue glacial lakes, and joy beyond all words. In conversations about life and God with strangers turned friends, God was speaking directly to some of my greatest fears at that time, and also unearthing depths of joy I had never known to that point. I laughed so deeply and fully on this journey, in awe of God, that my laughter became tears, and for the first time in my life, I experienced what it was to laugh-cry tears of joy as I walked for several miles along a dirt path, flanked by the Pacific Ocean on the island of Chiloé. Yes, God's plan was infinitely better than my plan.



I wish I could say that this journey was the turning point for me in trusting Jesus with everything, and for entering gladly into the life of discipleship with God at the helm of my life, but it was not. I still had a couple more years of rebellion in me, of refusing to trust God in certain key areas of my life, of refusing to let God in. But God was wearing down my resistance with his love.

Some time after this journey, and after graduating from college, I was uncertain about my next steps, or what “I was going to do with my life.” “I need to find out what I’m gonna do with my life,” had been my motto for a few years by then. At one point I realized that this phrase repeated so often from my lips had effectively thrown away the present moment. “I need” implies lack; to “find out” something I don’t know, what I’m “going to do” sometime out there. At this age of stepping into a career and beginning to earn a living, I began to say “I’m in the process of discovery,” and I meant it. I surrendered it to God in prayer, and so I stopped worrying about it. It had taken me a long time to get there, but I was finally there: worry free about my life, just as Jesus had commanded. At the time I was working at a motel on the coast of Maine, and within two days of prayerfully giving my career life to God, in a similar way to how I had surrendered my journey to him in Patagonia, I was talking to a guest at the motel who learned that I spoke Spanish and Portuguese and said, “You need to be an interpreter.” She was a Jesus follower, who also happened to be an interpreter. Well, I was ready to hear that message then, and I began researching everything I could find online about interpreting. That guest left the motel, though we stayed in communication, and within two days, another guest said, “You need to be an interpreter in my clinic in Worcester!” This guest was a doctor at a community health center in central Massachusetts.

A few months later, I was indeed interpreting Spanish and Portuguese at her clinic in Worcester, and here is where Jesus really called me out to him on the waters. I had learned my Spanish in Argentina and in college, and the majority of the Spanish-speaking patients at the clinic were from Puerto

Rico and the Dominican Republic. The Spanish from these places is very distinct from that of Argentina, and the cultures and even everyday expressions vary widely across Latinx communities. The patients would take one look at me, hear me speak, and wonder (sometimes aloud) whatever on earth I was doing there as an interpreter. “This guy doesn’t speak Spanish!” I would hear them speak and say to myself, “This isn’t Spanish!” But I knew without a doubt that God had invited me into this work, so I did everything I could to entrust it all to Him, yielding every encounter to the Holy Spirit and asking for God to speak through me and give my ears the ability to understand. “Save me, God!” In addition to the classes I took on medical terminology and the ethics of medical interpreting, I took out books on tape from the library with Puerto Rican readers and followed along with them, repeating phrases and sentences hundreds of times, rewinding and playing the tapes again and again until I could speak in a way the patients would understand, and I prayed, earnestly and fervently. “Save me, Lord!” My Spanish reached levels I would never have dreamed, and God proved more than faithful to hold me up on those waters. Sometimes words I hadn’t even remembered learning would be on my lips, right at the perfect moment.

But would you believe I had not yielded my life entirely to Jesus at this point? I still was holding out, unable to let go and fully trust God with my life. That is a much longer story that would take far too long to tell, but I will spare you the specifics to say that eventually I did yield everything to Jesus. God’s grace and a palpable knowledge of divine favor I knew I did not deserve and could never earn had finally convinced me: Jesus was who he said he was, and I wanted to follow him wherever he wanted me to go. His was a journey of trust, of faith, and of mystery. It was a path of sublime beauty, of challenges and struggles, and a call beyond my abilities and strength. God had called me out on the waters, and Jesus had shown me a way to walk there in full trust that the Holy Spirit would catch me. This moment of surrender was what John Wesley would have called “justifying grace,” a grace that I actively embraced and believed, and received in my

life. And God spoke through, and used people, people who committedly and unabashedly followed Jesus and knew him as their Lord, people who exuded a love that captivated and confounded me. All I knew was that I wanted to learn more about following the Holy Spirit's lead like they did, and serving others in a way that would make this Jesus real to them in the same way he had suddenly become real to me.

There is so much more of this story I could tell, how eventually I knew that God was inviting me to a whole new dimension of interpreting, interpreting the Word of God, which is the language of God's Kingdom. I could tell of going from the clinic to work in the hospital, of taking part in and leading small groups at church, of missions in Brazil, of Theology School and my introduction to Methodist Brazilians in Saugus and Worcester, of stepping out on the waters of marriage to Milka and becoming a stepfather to Carlos and Karlene, of God's faithfulness through all the changes and challenges along the way, but alas, our time today is short. But I would like to share one last way that Jesus called me out over the waters, even this week!

Many of you know I had a birthday this past week. It was amazing to receive such an outpouring of love and care from you, in all the cards and messages you sent. Thank you so much! At the outset of the week there also was a trustee meeting for Pleasant Street, which I had already committed to attend. A couple of weeks before my birthday, Milka booked an overnight for the family to have some time away at the beach, where we could rest some from all the work and energy involved with selling a home, moving, settling into a new home, and getting to know the two new churches I have been called to pastor here. It has been joyful work, but it has still been work. Without immediately realizing it, Milka booked our stay for the same night as the trustee meeting. I'm going to be vulnerable with you again. My little boat of safety at that moment was a commitment to "being responsible" to all of you, continuing to establish trust with you, and showing my dedication to our work together to celebrate the Gospel of Jesus Christ through our life as a church. I want to do a good job here; I

want to be excellent at this work. The winds of chaos and the waves of my emotions and feelings told me that if I told you I would not be able to attend the meeting, you would think I was being irresponsible. I wondered if I was setting a bad precedent to all of you, and if I was “messing everything up” in the first few weeks of my appointment here. These were the winds and waves that battered my boat. I drafted an email but didn’t send it, and wrestled with the whole thing for a couple of days, straining at the oars. Jesus, however, was calling me out on the water, through my wife, to trust in a deeper wisdom that took me beyond my security boat of “being responsible to all of you.” I felt real risk with that, but I knew implicitly that Milka was right to spirit me away. Husbands, listen to your wives! So often they are tapping into a deeper wisdom and grace than we men appreciate or acknowledge. It’s an exaggeration to say our wives are always in step with the Spirit, but they very often are. So, listen to your wife. Not that I am any expert at this! Milka will tell you that this is a lesson hard-learned, re-learned, and learned all over again, until I have to learn it afresh tomorrow, or rather, probably as soon as I go talk to Milka after finishing this message. All told, I finally did send the email to say I would be unable to attend, and within an hour or two the meeting had been postponed to the following week with barely a blip. You all were very gracious with me. And our time away as a family was a godsend. We even spent a whole afternoon swimming in ocean waters churned up from the passing hurricane. But peace reigned throughout, and we enjoyed some much needed rest. It may sound like a simple thing, and it is a simple thing, but that window of heaven meeting earth would not have been possible had I listened to my fearful emotions and shut out the invitation to rest in God’s love, had I kept on straining at those oars and told my wife and family I “needed to be responsible and do ‘God’s work’ at the church.” This experience was an example of God’s “sanctifying grace.” This is grace that God offers to purify us to his purposes, calling us out of our own, and freeing us up in the freedom and New Life that only the Holy Spirit can offer.

So what do I mean to say with all these things I have shared with you? God, who is eternal, who is love, is constantly calling out from just beyond our place of comfort and security, to enter into His New Creation and let Him cast out our fear. If you feel you are straining at the oars, making very little progress against the wind, look for him out there on the waves, and listen for his word to you. Don't be alarmed if you don't recognize him at first. It took me several years to begin to see Jesus for who he is, especially when it came to entrusting the more fragmented and broken places within my heart to Him. I'm still learning what it means to hear God say, "Take heart. I am. Be not afraid." It is a daily exercise in listening, trusting, discerning, and letting go of my earthly security to accompany Peter out on the waters to meet the Lord, and finally muster the humility to cry out, "Lord, save me!"

And here is one last point before we close. As God's creation, we are ever and always in a place of utter and total dependence on God, our Creator, and Jesus' call to the life of faith is always just beyond where we can go without God's help. While we do exert the effort to meet Jesus where he is, while we are called to step out of the boat, inevitably our journey of faith will bring us to the end of ourselves, where we need God to catch us if we'll ever continue on any further. Jesus is right there for Peter. He has been there for me, and I know he has been there for many of you too. If, however, you have yet to get out of that boat, know today that he is right there. Notice the disciples' response when Peter and Jesus return to the boat: They say to Jesus, "Truly you are the Son of God," and they worship him. Truly Jesus is the Son of God, and today we gather to worship him, and all of us can take great joy in heaven's word for us through him: "Take heart," he says, "I am. Be not afraid." Amen.