

With Us on the Sea

Sermon 109 | Greystone Baptist Church | August 8, 2021

John 6:15-21

The last couple of weeks have, in many ways, felt like an unwelcome sequel of the arrival of COVID-19. As the Delta variant continues to impact our state and our community, mask mandates are being reinstated – we've made the decision to do the same here at church. Numbers are rising, people are testing positive, and all the hopes of getting this thing behind us seem to be plummeting and taking our morale with it.

This time around there is a new kind of fatigue to the whole experience, there is an uneasy familiarity to the worry, the fear, and the uncertainty. For many, it feels like we are heading into another dark night, just as we were getting used to the light at the end of our COVID tunnel.

Like the disciples getting in the boat as evening draws near and darkness begins to cover the land,
we find ourselves with more concerns,
...more questions than ever.

John's choice of language underscores the vulnerability of the moment by harkening back to the beginning of creation. "As evening came to be..." verse 16 says, setting the stage for what comes next. As Wes Howard-Brook says, John "brings readers into the world of becoming, the transitory place of ordinary life in which nothing is certain and everything changes."^[1]

The boat, carrying the disciples, drifts out to sea and we are left wondering: Where is Jesus? Is he still up on the mountain where he went to retreat after multiplying the bread and fish? What will happen when he comes back down to find that his friends are nowhere to be found, that they've abandoned him and left him without a boat, without a way home? And what will come of the disciples, setting out on the journey alone?

This is one of only two times in the Gospel when Jesus and the disciples separate from one another. The other time, of course, being Gethsemane.

This time, however, there was no discussion about where Jesus was going, when he was planning to come back, or what the disciples should do in the meantime. John simply tells us, in one short verse, that he had to get away quickly, to avoid being taken by force, and made king. That's how the crowd responded to Jesus' miracle on the hillside, when he took a meager serving of bread and fish and fed thousands who had gathered to be close to him. After witnessing the miracle, the people did what people do... they thought Jesus was amazing and they wanted to enthrone him, to give him political power and name him King. But that is not what Jesus came to do, that isn't the kind of power he wanted to wield... In fact he had something totally different in mind. So he retreated to the mountains, alone.

Here, everything is unknown, everything is up in the air, and everything is looking a bit worrisome when the disciples get into the boat as evening approaches and the light succumbs to darkness.

This motif of light and darkness is one used throughout the Gospel of John to give the readers a clue about what is to come. In the prologue John tells us that Jesus is the light of the world, the one who will overcome the darkness. And here we are, 5 chapters later, heading into dark waters on a boat, while Jesus seems to be missing in action.

As we discover what happens next, we can almost feel it in our gut, because we know a little something about facing darkness alone.

Even before the pandemic began nearly 18 months ago, loneliness was on the rise. ...Partly due to technological advances allowing us to live our lives more and more in echo chambers of our own thoughts and opinions. Add to that months and months of social distancing, virtual gatherings, and isolation in the midst of one of the scariest global health crises many of us have ever experienced. We have all learned a little something about facing the darkness alone, haven't we?

This pandemic isn't the only solitary darkness though. Many of us can remember moments in our lives when the bills were due and we weren't sure how we would pay them. When the diagnosis came back and it wasn't good, but we knew that we would have to accept it. When the news came that a friend or loved one had been in a terrible accident. When the pregnancy test came back negative after praying it would be positive. When the acceptance letter we were waiting for wasn't a word of acceptance at all. When the grade on the test wasn't quite high enough... we could go on and on because our lives are full of moments like these. And all too often they compound, all at the same time.

...Moments of shame and sadness, moments when our best isn't good enough, moments of utter vulnerability, moments of brokenness. In these moments, we know a little something of being in a boat, traveling across a dark and stormy sea. The disciples rowed on anyway, as the wind blew and the sea tossed, they made their way toward Capernaum. I wonder if they prayed as the wind picked up and the boat started to rock, like problems compounding all at the worst possible moments. Did they cry out to God asking for calmer seas? Were they looking for Jesus, wondering why he wasn't there? Were they tempted to give up on God, give up on Jesus, and give themselves over to the wind, the waves, the journey?

In his haunting memoir, *Night*, Holocaust survivor, Elie Wiesel writes about his experience as a prisoner in concentration camps. After months of death, horror, and tragedy, there is a moment when the gallows are set for three who had crossed a line and were condemned to death for it. In the midst of so much unbearable pain compounding on top of pain, Wiesel remembers this particular experience being different from the other horrific scenes he and his fellow prisoners were compelled to observe. As Wiesel stood before the terrible scene, waiting for the signal from the head of camp to execute the task, he remembers someone behind him crying out: "Where is God? Where is he?"

Then, the signal came, the chairs that once supported the condemned prisoners were knocked over... the deed was done. Afterwards, Wiesel and

the others were made to parade by the gallows to observe and make note of what could be their fate if they stepped out of line. In the midst of incomparable pain and gazing upon the lifeless prisoners, the same man whose voice rang in Wiesel's ear moments ago once again cried out in lament: "Where is God now?" Wiesel remembers hearing a response bubble up from deep within himself saying: "Where is he? Here he is... he is hanging here on this gallows."^[2]

A few miles out from shore, as the waves began to rise around them, surely someone on the boat wanted to ask that same question: "Where is God now?"

I'd be willing to bet that most of us have asked the same question in times of great pain, sadness, confusion, and loss. Where are you God? How are you letting this happen? Why aren't you showing up to put an end to this nonsense, this tragedy, this suffering, this pain?

We all have moments when we want – or even need God to intervene, calming the storms that rage around us. But there are times, like we find in today's Gospel reading, when the storm does not calm down, the waves are not commanded to be still, and the winds do not cease.

But we also know, and find in today's Gospel, that though God is not working in the ways we might expect, or desire... God is still right there with us.

From the boat the disciples look out toward the water and see Jesus standing atop the waves. Without calming the storm, Jesus stands beside them in the midst of it, feeling the movement of the water beneath his feet, withstanding the winds that blow all around, Jesus is in the storm with the disciples as they cross over to Capernaum, reminding them, reminding us, that when we want to ask: *Where is God now?* The answer is always: God is here now, with us, on the gallows, in the storm, in every moment of our lives... though we may feel it, we are never alone.

So in these days of so much uncertainty, as tents are raised once again in local hospitals to manage the surge of patients... as children, parents, teachers, and administrators prepare for yet another unpredictable school year, as church members make difficult decisions about worshipping at home or in the sanctuary... as workers who had just settled back into their offices contemplate returning to home to wait out this surge... As caregivers once again worry about their high risk loved ones, as congregate care facilities reinstate regulations and the threat of further isolation looms... as we struggle with fear and anger and frustration and fatigue...

No matter what the storm is called: whether it goes by the name of Delta or some other name altogether... May we always remember that we are not alone. May we remember that there will be times when darkness sets in, when the seas beneath us feel unsteady, when the winds around us start to blow... but as we look out from our boats across the rough waters that rise on every side, may we always remember and hear the voice from somewhere deep within that God is right here, with us, offering the promise of *presence* that sees us all the way through to the other side. Amen.

[1] Howard-Brook, 148

[2] Elie Wiesel, 62.