

Good Sunday morning from a warm hill in Rockport.....

We're in the "the dog days of summer." These are "the hot, sultry days of summer. They were historically the period following the heliacal rising of the star system Sirius, which Hellenistic astrology connected with heat, drought, sudden thunderstorms, lethargy, fever, mad dogs, and bad luck. This year they occur from Wednesday, July 22, 2020 through Saturday, August 22, 2020." (from Wikipedia) The *Old Farmer's Almanac* "considers the Dog Days to be the 40 days beginning July 3 and ending August 11." Take your pick for what you believe is the timeframe of the "dog days" this year!

Disregarding the calendar beginning and ending dates given above, I'd say our "dog days" began around March 15th, the last Sunday we were able to worship together in our sanctuary in Thomaston! It seems they will continue until this worldwide pandemic is somewhat controlled, if not entirely wiped out. But... what do we do if that doesn't happen? What do we do if we have to live with this scourge for the rest of our days? Not a happy thought, I agree.... But maybe this pandemic is the reminder – the wake up call – we've all needed to get us to finally focus on what is most important in our lives and how we are going to live out those important facets of our lives.... What do you think? I've certainly begun to think of each day of my life differently now.... Have you?

I end my sermon this morning with some thoughts about certainty. We are now living in the most uncertain time of our history, at least in our lifetimes anyway.... To say we are *unsettled* is a gross understatement. How to settle ourselves each day, in the midst of this insidious virus roaming around the world and settling itself in millions of people, is, I think, a great challenge. How shall you settle yourself this day?

One way to settle ourselves, at least for a half hour, will come again on Sunday, August 23rd at 3 p.m. as we come together (safely!) to share in another ice cream sandwich social in Leach Hall, or outside in our parking lot at the church if the weather cooperates and it isn't too hot. Let me know if you can join us so we'll be sure to have enough ice cream sandwiches for everyone. I know we all enjoyed our time together, safely in masks and from short distances, in July at our first ice cream gathering!

Reach me at freerangepastor@gmail.com or leave me a text at 207-322-1948 to let me know you can join us on August 23rd!

Blessings to all this warm Sunday morning of "the dog days" of Summer..... Susan

p.s. I will download this morning's scripture reading and sermon to my Facebook page shortly: [freerangepastor](#) for anyone who wants to tune in..... and I believe Margie is also downloading my sermon to Federated's Facebook page....

p.p.s. A few of you have taken me up on my offer to come chat with you in your yard or open garage, on your porch or deck, etc..... wearing one of my many masks, bringing my own libation, and carrying my own lawn chair.... and maybe bug net, too! Be in touch if you're interested – call me at 207-322-1948 or send me an e-mail to freerangepastor@gmail.com.....

p.p.p.s *Thank you to those of you who send me your e-mail responses to my writings. I don't always get a chance to write back to each one of you, but I appreciate all your responses! They keep me motivated to keep writing.....*

**A simple online worship service for Sunday, August 9, 2020
as prepared by Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Pastor of the Federated Church of Thomaston**

Opening Prayer

God of grace, be with us this morning.
We gather through cyberspace, if not in the flesh,
to encounter you in word and deed,
and to worship you even with all our faults and frailties.
As Creator and maker of each of us,
give us your guidance this day....
as we are in great need of your wisdom....
in these difficult times.
Amen.

A Prayer of Confession and Words of Affirmation
(from *Seasons of the Spirit* for August 13, 2017)



God of all, like every family, we have our baggage.
We ask your kindness and comfort as we unpack some of what causes us pain and separation from one another in an attempt to put things right....
the small annoyances that we let grow into big frustrations that blind us to life's everyday joys,
the jealousies that sour relationships and poison our thoughts about others,
the times we forget to listen and take people we love for granted,

the way we run around and pack so much into our lives that we don't give time for the precious gift of gathering peaceably with one another [from a distance at the moment!],

the squabbles and misunderstandings, the careless words and impatience, the inequities and falling-outs....

We ask forgiveness of one another and that your healing spirit of reconciliation will move within us and provoke us into being more conscientious about living in genuine and trustworthy relationships....

Let us remember that God is saving all of us by divine mercy, no exceptions. No matter how we are tossed about by our emotions, no matter how insecure and lacking in insight we are, we are all saved in spite of ourselves, good and bad alike.

Thanks be to God. Amen

A Reading of Scripture – Matthew 14:22-33

Immediately [Jesus] made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

A sermon based on Matthew 14:22-33

"Come"

Will you pray with me. Challenging God, you call us to get into the boat of faith and then ask us to jump out into the stormy sea of life. Throw us a life preserver, but don't forget to show us how to use it, too. Amen.

Our passage for today is one that strikes very close to home for me - not because I've ever walked on water, or because I've done much boating. I'm prone to seasickness and I have claustrophobia in enclosed spaces and on boats. This story strikes close to

home for me because I can't swim. I know "how" to swim. I know the mechanics of swimming, but if my tippy toes do not touch the bottom of whatever body of water I might happen to be in, I panic. My arms start flailing and thrashing about, my mouth goes open, my eyes get big, and I PANIC!!! So, I feel some close kinship to Peter in this story. As soon as I realize my security does not lie in a firm foundation under my feet, my swimming ability, or inability, takes a dive and I am not a happy camper or swimmer.

Immediately after Peter makes his brash request of Jesus to invite him to walk on water, too, Jesus simply responds with the invitation, "Come." Peter gets out of the boat and starts to walk on the water. Then the wind blows up and he realizes he cannot walk on water the way Jesus seems to be doing. He panics, and yells out, "Lord, save me!"

I've only had one or two times when I've found myself in this predicament in the water, and my words were close to what Peter said to Jesus, only I was saying them with some more colorful four letter content! Not a good thing, but a very human response, I think...

This text is about several different themes, it seems to me - themes that lie at the heart of what it means to be a person of faith -- trust, *acting* on faith, the *power* of community and certainty.

Trusting that things will work out, especially when the storms of life are raging, as the hymn goes, is one of the greatest challenges we face as people of faith. It's easy to be a Christian when things are going well, don't you think? We've talked about this before. But when health issues arise, or someone close to us dies, or some other crisis of life hits us, or a pandemic with no end in sight knocks the stuffing out of all of us, it's much harder to trust that all will be well, later if not sooner.

And yet, as people of faith, that is exactly what we are called to remember – we are told in sermons, by the bedside, in the cemetery, "trust in the Lord." Do not let doubt get the upper hand. Remember Jesus' words that he offers so often in the Gospels, as he does in our passage for this morning, "Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid." Trust.

Acting on faith is the second theme this passage offers. Be willing to take risks with and for Jesus. Following Jesus is a risky business, but it's worth the effort. If the boat in our passage for this morning symbolizes the church, then stepping outside of the church means stepping out into a hostile sea of people and events that will test and challenge our faith. It doesn't mean forcing our religion on others, although too often that is what some Christians want to do. It does mean being willing to expose ourselves to disdain, ridicule, hatred, and for some, outright persecution.

Peter didn't realize he was in trouble when he got out of the boat until he felt the wind come up. If he'd continued to focus on the goal, *to focus on Jesus, acting in faith*, and had not begun focusing on the obstacle of the wind, he probably wouldn't have panicked. He probably wasn't afraid of the water while he was in the boat. After all, he was a fisherman! But stepping out into very uncharted waters – with no boat around him, was an entirely different matter!

I know in my mind, even though I haven't practiced it, that if I didn't panic in the water I wouldn't go under. If I didn't start focusing on the fact that my feet would not touch the bottom, my floating power would keep me up. My arms wouldn't start thrashing about dangerously, and I wouldn't start trying to gulp air with a wide open mouth. But those are all challenging things to remember when one is afraid of the water.

They're challenging to remember when times are rough, when things are going badly, when health fails, when family issues turn sour. Turning one's eyes upon Jesus, as the hymn goes, comes in handy, especially when the storms of life are raging, as another hymn goes, but it's not an easy thing to do.

It seems to me the third theme of our passage is the *power* of community. What's one rule a person is taught when they learn to swim? If we were together in person this morning, instead of on line, I'd ask for your answers to that question. But here's my answer -- Don't swim alone! Always have a buddy with you. Always make sure somebody knows where you are when you're swimming.

Even though Jesus didn't say to Peter, "Come, but be sure you bring some of those other guys with you," he knew *he* was already out there in the water, so Peter would have company. He would have somebody to reach out and give him a hand if he got into trouble.

Too often I talk with people who think they should be able to handle their problems without any help, without anyone else knowing they're in trouble, without wanting to bother anybody. Too often they don't even mention God or Jesus when they tell me they're having a hard time.

As much as we might like to think we can be self-sufficient, independent people, it's not very helpful to live in that fashion. None of us are alone. You've probably heard this quote from monk and spiritual writer, Thomas Merton from me before, "We're not alone, we only imagine that we are."

None of us are an island standing alone in a stormy sea. We are called to be in community, to live together, to love together, and if we have to, to get out of the boat

together, while holding one another's hands and reminding one another that God is with us.

Trusting in God, stepping out in faith, and joining together in a community of support are all necessary if our goal is to get through life with some semblance of order and communion and comfort. But there's one more thing I believe we can take from this story about Jesus walking on water and Peter not walking on water. It's the concept of certainty.

Right now we are in the midst of a very uncertain time, more uncertain than any other time in our lives to this point. Nobody knows when this pandemic will end, if ever. Nobody knows when we'll "get back to normal," whatever that was or will be. Nobody knows if a vaccine will be developed that will get us through this covid-19 crisis because it is uncertain if everyone will take the vaccine.

Every day I remind myself of what I am certain. And it's not a long list. I'm certain that this moment is all I have. *This* moment in my life – to think, to pray, to act, to help, to have compassion, to allow myself to be both worried and confident at the same time, to love and be loved. Of what are you certain?

Certainty is a precious commodity, not to be taken lightly or assumed. The Bible tells us that Jesus was certain of God. His was a certainty that took him to the cross and beyond, and *his* certainty has carried his followers through the worst of times and the best of times for over two thousand years.

Jesus said to the fearful disciples rocking in a boat, "Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid." Let us remember those words, whether we are in the midst of personal struggles, or dealing with a worldwide pandemic, or embroiled in political and economic tensions all around us. There are no better words to keep in our minds and hearts when the storms of life are raging and waves of uncertainty are splashing all around us. "Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid."

Let the people say, "Amen."

To hold in our prayers this day.....

Please hold in your prayers all those affected by the coronavirus and the families of those who have died from the virus.... and all those affected, which should be every one of us, by the cruel condition of racism.... and all those who have worked tirelessly for the building and rebuilding of our nation into one people, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.....

From our most recent bulletin and more....

Ann Foster, Carol Moss, Fred Bagnall, Harriet Williams, Julie Pollitt, Zeke Bryant, Sally Harjula, Elliot, Trish Perry, April DeVarney, Helmut Steger, John Flaherty, George Ng, Doug and BJ Thomson, Heather Van Buskirk, Muriel's grandson Jared, and Jackie's 92 year old friend Genevieve Micali, Michael and Gail in southern Maine, Pricilla O'Hara on the death of her husband Wally.... *Please send me the names of those you would like for me to add to this list next Sunday!*

A Benediction

Go into this day with peace and love in your hearts.

May God bless you and keep you.

May God's face radiate upon you and flood you with grace and tender mercies.

May God smile upon you always and cover your life with peace.

Amen.

Readings from the RCL (Revised Common Lectionary)

for Sunday, August 16, 2020

Genesis 45:1-15; Psalm 133; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15:(10-20), 21-28

Words to ponder today about certainty.....

"I like the scientific spirit – the holding off, the being sure but not too sure, the willingness to surrender ideas when the evidence is against them: this is ultimately fine – it always keeps the way beyond open – always gives life, thought, affection, the whole [person], a chance to try over again after a mistake – after a wrong guess." ~ Walt Whitman

"Ignorance more frequently begets confidence than does knowledge: it is those who know little, not those who know much, who so positively assert that this or that problem will never be solved by science." ~ Charles Darwin

"To learn which questions are unanswerable, and not to answer them: this skill is most needful in times of stress and darkness." ~ Ursula K. Le Guin

"I believe in intuitions and inspirations.... I sometimes FEEL that I am right. I do not KNOW that I am." ~ Albert Einstein