

As we adapt to a new normal, while hopefully coming to the end of Covid-19, we are facing yet another challenge, a new form of social anxiety. Over the past year and a half, we were forced to physically distance from family and friends, and many of us spent most of that time in our homes, with video calls and Zoom events becoming the primary means of socializing. Consequently, many now feel anxious and have a degree of social unease after living through this global pandemic. Therapist, Leslie Adams, writes, “Dealing with long periods of isolation can increase social anxiety. Even those who would consider themselves naturally more extroverted could be struggling. Being outside our bubble will feel overwhelming because it is a drastic change. We will notice all the subtle things that we don’t see or hear on video calls. We will feel like we are struggling, like our senses are on overdrive, because they are.” As my friend, Bill Uetricht, says, “This pandemic has been one of the most anxious times in recent memory for all of us, and anxiety has a way of lingering, affecting our behavior and our interactions with others. This happens even if it is not fully rational.”

You see, throughout this pandemic, we have placed boundaries around ourselves and around the way we function. We have imposed

artificial boundaries with the intent purpose of staying **away** from others.

The anxiety some people now face is very real, and it is rooted in a newly developed fear of being **with** or **encountering others**.

Anxieties over crossing boundaries and encountering others are nothing new in human history. In fact, such anxiety was very real in Jesus' lifetime. In Biblical times, the Sea of Galilee was a well-defined **geographical** boundary. The Jewish people were on one side of the sea, and on the other side you would find those despicable, contemptible Gentiles in the country of the Gerasenes, those vile "others" with whom the Jewish people did **not** want to connect. As we move through Mark's gospel, we find many of the recorded events that begin in chapter four take place on alternate sides of the Sea of Galilee. And, the most direct route from one side to the other was across the sea. In today's reading, when we hear Jesus say to the disciples, "Let us go across to the other side of the Sea of Galilee," he is indicating **more** than just a change of venue. This is Jesus' **first** venture in Mark's gospel to what would be considered a dangerous, even inappropriate, destination because that is where the Gentiles resided. Good Jewish people did not go there. The rabbis did not go there. Remember, the people on the other side were considered "other." Yet, today, early on in Mark's gospel, we see Jesus deliberately

demonstrate his claim that his mission extends beyond the Jews. And, by carrying his ministry into Gentile territory, Jesus reaches out to strangers, those despised “others,” those who were considered enemies of the house of Israel.

On the way to the “other side,” a place and experience which created great anxiety within them because they would have to encounter those considered “other,” their boat struggles with a great windstorm. Now, the storm itself is not an unusual occurrence on the Sea of Galilee. And, the disciples who are accompanying Jesus in the boat, are accustomed to the unpredictable nature of the sea. After all, several of them were experienced fishermen. But, the disciples become afraid and, in their fear and desperation, they wake Jesus and cry out, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” Jesus then speaks saying, “**Peace! Be still!**” as he **rebukes** the wind and the waves. God’s Word, embodied in Jesus, speaks to the chaos and the storm is stilled. The very Lord who, in our first lesson, told Job that God is the one who conquers the power of the sea, is the same One Jesus embodies as he speaks, and the storm is stilled.

Friends, for the past several years we have been experiencing a raging storm in our culture and, over the past year and a half, a raging storm throughout the world because of this pandemic. There have been

times when it has felt as though we are in a small boat on a stormy sea. We have seen acts of violence and oppression in this country – political violence, racial violence, and rising gun violence in our communities as the number of mass shootings just seems to escalate. The evils of systemic racism and white supremacy are plaguing our country. These challenges, in addition to the global pandemic, have at times left us feeling helpless as we attempt to navigate this storm. Yes, we have experienced and are experiencing an intense storm. And, quite frankly, this storm will intensify as we face mounting threats from climate change. There has been and is much chaos, and I believe many of us have been and are scared. And, in the depth of **the storms we face**, the pain and suffering we see causes us to cry out, “God, do you not care that we are perishing?” I say this honestly – there is a feeling of betrayal as we cry out amid these experiences in the face of what often seems to be the silence of God.

When looking at this gospel story, it is important to note that Jesus never says, “There is nothing to be afraid of.” He asks, “Why are you afraid?” Jesus’ question is very different from simply saying, “There is nothing to be afraid of.” The storm the disciples faced was fierce, as are the wind and the waves of chaos that threaten us. Jesus’ question does not deny the chaos that is present. Instead, Jesus asks, “Why are you afraid?”

Have you still no faith?” And, it is interesting that time and time again, we hear the words of scripture say to us, “Do not be afraid.” You see, the hard truth is that fearsome things are very real, things like pain, illness, rejection, failure, violence, meaninglessness, losing one’s job, money problems, and death. As we grow in faith and name such fearsome things as real, we also discover they do **not** have the last word. They do **not** have ultimate power over us, because reigning over this world of fearsome things is a God who is **mightier** than they. Time and again in scripture, the word given us is, “Do not be afraid.” In fact, you might say it is the first and last word of the gospel. It is the word spoken to a young girl named Mary, it is the word spoken to Joseph, it is spoken to the shepherds, and it is the word spoken to the women when they discover an empty tomb. “Do not be afraid.” **Not** because there are no fearsome things on the sea of our day and our lives, **not** because there are no storms, fierce winds, or waves, but rather because **God is with us!** Like a mother comforting her child, God speaks to us and says, “Don’t be afraid, because you are **not** alone. I am with you.”

In times like these, it is easy to forget that God’s all-powerful Word is **still spoken** amid the noise and chaos of our lives and world. Like the disciples and like Paul in our second reading, we articulate and list the

challenges we face as we look to rediscover our faith in the promise of God's powerful Word. And, like Jesus' word of peace spoken over the raging storm, God's word **still** can calm our deepest fears. As Martin Luther wrote in his great hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," one little word above all earthly powers can *fell* whatever darkness threatens to undo us. Friends, we **cannot** navigate the storm alone, but that living Word is **with** us and **in** us and God is calling **us** to **live** that incarnated Word in our present context. We may feel fear, but the incarnational Word of God is present in the Body of Christ. And, the Church – the Body of Christ in this world – is **also** called to **rebuke** the storm.

Friends, the deepest truth in life as we live these days – as we again encounter others, as we encounter all those we consider "other," as we regather, and as we face the storms of life – is a truth that only faith in a God who raised Jesus from the grave can teach us. It is this: even though there are real and fearsome things in this life, they need **not** paralyze us; they need **not** have dominion over us; they need **not** own us; they need **not** have the last word, because **we are not alone in the boat!** Present to us in the boat is the One who, with gentle authority, speaks and rebukes that which threatens life. And, that Word gifts us with what we need the most, with what is called for – **peace that passes all understanding.**