

# Take heart

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, Associate Rector,  
at the eleven o'clock service, August 7, 2011, The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost.  
Based on Matthew 14:22-33.*

This week I heard a story about a church, located in a more rural setting than ours, that called a woman as its rector. It was the first time that the church had had a woman minister, and some in the parish were not happy about that. One man was particularly disturbed, because he had always taken his priest fishing, and he worried that the new female pastor wouldn't like to fish.

But he invited her to go fishing, and she accepted his invitation. When they got out on the lake, it was clear she didn't know much about fishing. The man had to help her bait her hook. Then he had to show her how to cast the line. When she finally caught a fish, he had to show her how to reel it in and take it off the hook. He did not get much fishing done himself.

To make a difficult situation worse, the wind picked up and the day grew cooler. The priest mentioned a couple of times that it seemed to be getting cooler, and finally commented that she wished she had brought her jacket from the car. Accepting the fact that the day was pretty much a loss anyway, the man offered to pull up anchor and take her back to shore to get her jacket.

"Oh, no, that won't be necessary," she said. She stood up (always a dangerous move in a small boat), stepped neatly over the side of the boat, and began to walk on top of the water to the shore. The man watched for a moment and then shook his head. "Look at that," he said to himself. "She can't even swim."

Could there be a better gospel for us to hear, read, mark and inwardly digest following this past turbulent week? A week that began with the debt ceiling crisis and the ensuing debacle as our elected officials tried to resolve the crisis. No sooner had it been resolved (and none too satisfactorily according to many), the Dow tanked . . . then plunged again . . . and, sickeningly, again as it roller-coastered through Friday. Friday ended with the U.S. credit rating downgraded for the first time in history. We wait now to see what the global economic implications will be. And yesterday's helicopter crash in Afghanistan brought our most deadly day since this war began.

So I think we know something about being caught in a big storm, rowing what feels like a very small boat. Actually, you are sitting right now in what's called the NAVE of the church, nave from the Latin *navis* meaning "boat" or "ship."

Matthew offers this story of the disciples in their small boat, miles from land, tossed by high winds and waves, in the middle of the night no less, first afraid for their lives, then even more afraid of what they thought they were seeing coming toward them on the water.

Matthew's community was living through tough times, facing persecution. In the worldview of their time, the sea represented the forces of chaos, held at bay by the creative act of God, but always threatening. Being on the sea represented facing all the anxieties and dark forces that threaten the goodness of the created order. Walking on the sea, calming the storms, meant conquering the power of chaos—something they understood that only God could do. Matthew's community would have felt alone in their small boat/church, tossed by the waves and winds of conflict and persecution.

Did you notice how often "fear" is mentioned in this story? The disciples are "terrified"; they "cry out in fear." Jesus says, "Do not be afraid," or "Fear not" in the King James Version, words the angels say when they appear to mortals, who quite naturally are terrified. When Peter focuses on the strong wind instead of Jesus, he becomes "frightened." Fear is the primary emotion in this story.

Some years ago, a group of us went bareboat sailing for a few weeks in the Bahamas, meaning we rented a large sailboat (appropriately, as it turned out, named *Renegade*). The boat company provisioned the boat for us with food, water and fuel. We ourselves served as

the captain, the first mate, the crew, the cook and chief bottle-washer. We were free to sail anywhere we wanted. Some on our boat had never sailed before; the rest of us had sailed only on freshwater lakes, not on the ocean. Let's just say there was a steep learning curve.

But a week into the trip—after we had narrowly avoided capsizing, taught ourselves to navigate, extinguished a fire in our galley, and gloated as we sailed past our sister boat stuck on a sandbar—we were feeling like experienced sailors. Then, just as we sailed out into the open ocean, where the depth meter displayed numbers higher than we'd ever seen, the sky darkened and the wind picked up, thunder sounded, lightning flashed. Within minutes the calm turquoise waters had morphed into huge gray waves, crashing over the sides of our pitching boat as we fought to keep it upright. It's one of the few times in my life that I feared the end had come, that I would never see home again. I prayed, like Peter, "Lord, save me!"

None of us needs to be a sailor, or any kind of boater, to know intimately the fear of being overwhelmed by forces too great for us. The ability and inclination to feel fear is built right into us, and for good reason—it can save our life.

Fear is a natural response when we perceive that something or someone is threatening our life, our health, our well-being, our security, even our own self-image: our ancient hard-wiring is for fight or flight. Fear can mobilize us into action to save ourselves or someone we love. But fear can also immobilize us; it can distract us from what is really important; it can cause us to sink, if not into actual water, then into despair, darkness, inertia.

What are you afraid of this morning? Perhaps, given the economic turmoil of this past week, and indeed the recession of these past years, you fear the future, wondering if you can keep your job, if you can find work, how you can afford to keep a roof over your head and food on the table, how you can provide for yourself and your family. Perhaps you are terrified amidst the sudden storm of a dire medical diagnosis or the gradual decline of aging. Maybe it is death itself you fear, or embarrassment, or loneliness, or the loss of someone dear to you. Maybe you fear the past or fear the future. The storms of life do come upon us, and most of us do know fear.

But God, the God who is always creating us, redeeming us, sustaining us, doesn't want us to live in fear. Even the capacity for fear that is hard-wired into us is there ultimately to be lifesaving, life-giving. We are created to feel fear, yes, but we are not meant to live in fear.

The point of this story isn't about defying the laws of physics or biology. May we find, as Matthew's community found, Jesus reaching out to us, saying, "Take heart. I am with you." That's not a rebuke, but a steady encouragement in the midst of the storm.

We're living through some tough times, too. Amazingly, quite amazingly, God in Christ is with us at all times and in all things. Emmanuel: God with us. God reaches out to us across the storms and chaos of our lives. Despite what seems all evidence to the contrary, God climbs into our little boat with us, climbs right into the middle of our fear.

Take heart.

Take heart. God is with us.

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