



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
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## Life's Wild and Restless Sea

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, August 9, 2020  
The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Based on Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-33*

*Let us pray: Come, Holy Spirit, and ignite in us your holy fire; strengthen your people with the gift of faith, revive your Church with the breath of love, and renew the face of the earth, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

This past week the eastern seaboard of the United States, and even up into Canada, was battered by the strong winds and rain of tempestuous storm Isaiás. Several people lost their lives as trees were uprooted and toppled, streets and houses became submerged in water, and millions were—and, in fact, some still are—affected by electrical power outages. New York City was on a coastal flood watch alert.

The biblical name “Isaiás” is the Spanish language equivalent of the Hebrew name *Yesha’yahu* and means “Yahweh is salvation.” The name is built from the root *yasha’*, meaning “to save,” and *yah*, referring to the Hebrew God.

“Isaiah,” of course, is the English translation, and the apostle Paul quotes from the book of the prophet Isaiah in this morning’s reading from his letter to the Romans when he writes, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news.”

Paul could easily have been referring to the feet of Jesus walking on the Sea of Galilee towards the disciples during that terrifying storm in the Gospel story. Jesus brings words of good news that cut through the chaos of that storm to embrace the disciples’ fear and panic when he says, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

But the words in this story that really impact me come right after Peter begins to sink beneath the waves and cries out to Jesus. Jesus, in response, immediately reaches out his hand and catches Peter, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” And then they both get into the boat, at which point the wind and waves of the storm cease.

“You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

At first when I read those words I thought, “C’mon Jesus, give the guy a break! You’re gonna criticize him right in the middle of when he’s thinking that he is about to drown?! Way to go, man! Where did you get your pastoral care skills?”

It just seemed a bit unfair to me, that Jesus would chide Peter at that very moment, right in the middle of Peter’s experience of chaos, fear, and terror. I felt for Peter. He was the only one during that harrowing time who even dared to step out into the chaos of the storm to come to Jesus. He at least deserved a “Well done!,” not a reprimand.

But, of course, there was another way of thinking about this. Further exegesis yielded other parallels to the Greek text, but one more contemporary interpretation caught my attention. In that reading, verse 31 was rendered as: “Jesus didn’t hesitate. He reached down and grabbed [Peter’s] hand. Then he said, ‘Faint-hearted, what got into you?’”

“Faint-hearted, what got into you?”

Somehow the reading of Jesus' words in that way lands more gently than the words, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" They feel less accusatory and more...inquiring. I sense more compassion. I sense from this interpretation that Jesus is not trying to reprimand so much as he wants to understand when he asks, "What got into you?"

And, well, Jesus could have been justified with giving a rebuke: the disciples had forgotten all the miracles they had seen him perform and all the rescue missions they had witnessed prior to this moment. In fact, they had just seen him feed thousands of people from only two fish and five loaves of bread! They were unable to summon up the ways in which Jesus had already manifested his saving power in myriad situations.

What does get into us when we find ourselves flailing amid the metaphorical storms of life? Judging from the disciples' response, what got into them was fear—they were out there in the darkness, fighting to gain control of a boat being tossed to-and-fro by frightening waves, and thinking they had seen a ghost. Fear is a formidable power.

What got into them was fatigue—they were dealing with this crisis in the early morning hours, most likely between 3 and 6 a.m. and were probably tired from being up all night and having their energy reserves spent.

Those two things—fear and fatigue—seeped in and began to compromise and undermine what Jesus knew had been growing and budding: a fragile, delicate and nascent faith, perhaps as small as a mustard seed, but expanding in the time that he had been spending with them. Jesus knew that their faith was being edged out by this crisis.

We, too, can sometimes forget, like Peter and the disciples, Jesus' past faithfulness to us. We, too, can allow fear and fatigue and frustration to loom larger than our faith when circumstances seem all too overwhelming. I'm grateful for how author Frederick Buechner expresses God's grace, as if God says to us, "Here is the world. Terrible and beautiful things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you."<sup>i</sup>

*Yesha'yahu: "Yahweh is salvation."*

And terrible things do happen. Here we are, five months into this COVID pandemic with all of its devastation, and we don't quite know where we are heading. I think that we have even more questions now than ever before about the future of the pandemic in our country and in our world. Amidst the disruptions and challenges of this moment, we aren't sure what new future is emerging.

And so, just as he did with the disciples, Jesus comes to us in our most vulnerable moments. In the midst of the crisis the disciples faced, Jesus reveals himself to them. He makes his appearance when all seems lost and destruction looms, and they are becoming faint-hearted. In the midst of the churning and threatening sea, Jesus does what only God can do.

The message of this gospel story is not, "If only Peter had had enough faith, he would not have begun to sink beneath the waves." Just as the message for us is not, "If we have enough faith we would be able to overcome all of our problems in dramatic and breathtaking ways."

The message of the story is meant to reveal who Jesus is—it all points to him!—and in this particular case, the revelation of who he is only made possible in the midst of the chaos. For it is when Jesus allows the disciples to embark on this uncertain journey that they have the opportunity to see the power of God revealed—power that is unrivaled and unsurpassed. We have that same opportunity now.

Faith is a muscle that yearns to be stretched. It is the nature of faith—humble, active faith—to be willing to navigate a disorderly world and expect—expect!—to encounter Jesus there, even as it is also the nature of faith to waver when it has stepped into stressful and unfamiliar terrain. It is in those times when we may hear the words, "Faint-hearted, what got into you?" and we can be assured that Jesus understands.

Faith is not being able to walk on water, but daring to believe—in the face of all the evidence to the contrary—that God is with us as our boat makes its way through the storm.

Whether Jesus calms the storms of life itself, or he calms us—equipping us to journey through whatever chaos we are facing—he is there extending his hand without hesitation. Just as he did with Peter, into our confusion and turmoil, our doubt and uncertainty, our prayers for help, he grasps onto us when we feel we are sinking into the tumult of “our life’s wild, and restless sea,” to quote an old Methodist hymn.<sup>ii</sup>

Maybe the waves have just begun to lap at your ankles. Maybe they have reached your waist. Or maybe they are up to your forehead. But God, through the prophet Isaiah, tells us, “Don’t be afraid, I’ve redeemed you. I’ve called you by name. You are mine. When you are in over your head, I’ll be there with you. When you are in rough and stormy waters, you will not go down.”

*Yesha’yahu*: “Yahweh is salvation.” Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Beyond Words: Daily Meditations in the ABC’s of Faith*, HarperOne, San Francisco, ©2004, p. 139

<sup>ii</sup> “Jesus Calls Us O’er the Tumult” (No. 536) in *The Trinity Psalter Hymnal*, Joint Venture Publishing Board, Willow Grove, PA, ©2018

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