

Rowing Against the Wind
John 6:16-21; Exodus 3:13-15; John 1: 1-5
February 27, 2022 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Dr. Cathryn Turrentine

I have lived in New England since 2004. Eighteen years is long enough that snow storms all sort of run together in my memory. There are good winters and bad winters, and they all seem to have a lot of snow, one snow storm not much different from the others. Except for the storm that blew through here in March of 2017. That one I remember. Do you? It was a huge storm, especially on the Moultonborough side of the lake. At our house we got 27 inches of snow, and our power was out for four days.

That storm was called a lot of names as people were digging out, some of them can't be repeated in church. Officially she was called Stella. Stella was the worst storm I've ever been in, wind-wise. The wind blew the snow sideways, then back and forth, swirling constantly. It couldn't possibly have stayed in one place to be measured. Power lines in our area were down for days, tangled in downed trees and blocking the roads. Huge trees, surely more than a century old, were knocked down like dominoes. There were acres and acres along Rte. 109 that looked like they had been clear-cut by the wind. Bald Knob Country Club lost several hundred trees. The power company referred to our neighborhood as an "area of devastation."

Some of you have been to our house, so you know it has big picture windows surrounding the fireplace in the living room, and I watched through them all night long as the wind whipped our trees back and forth, bending the birches all the way down to the driveway and whipping them back upright and then back down again. I saw large limbs tumbling down the street. I held my breath as the line that brings electricity to our house from the power pole across the street gusted this way and that, straining at its leash. I gasped as the trees danced right up to that power line and back again. All night long it went on: wind and snow and debris crashing against our windows and our roof, threatening, threatening, coming again and again, never letting up.

As I watched and waited, I thought of all the people who didn't have a strong shelter like mine. I thought of homeless people and sailors and first responders – anyone caught out in that storm. I prayed for them. Gale-force winds are unforgiving, and they can be deadly.

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When Jesus chose his disciples, he picked fishermen. These were not riverbank fishermen, who stood safely on land and cast lines out into the water. These were fishermen who went to sea. They knew the power and danger of storms. They knew the wind.

In today's Gospel text, these disciples get into a boat to cross the Sea of Galilee. When they are right in the middle of the sea, a great storm blows up – a terrible storm. It is too late to go back, too far to go forward, and there is nothing to do but pull together and row against the wind.

For these disciples, these fishermen, "rowing against the wind" doesn't just mean "going nowhere fast." It means grasping the oar with both hands and pulling and pulling and pulling until every muscle in their bodies is spent, throwing all their human strength against the chaotic power of the whole universe and grasping in the end just how inconsequential, how feeble, how finite they are in the face of the storm. For these disciples, rowing against the wind means clinging to their tiny boat for their very lives. Rowing against the wind means abandoning hope of reaching the other side and simply praying to God for rescue.

And then, in the middle of this awful storm, the disciples see Jesus coming to them across the water, the answer to their prayer – Jesus, their friend and teacher who confuses and astounds them – Jesus, who turns water into wine – Jesus, who heals the sick – Jesus, who has just fed 5,000 people with five barley loaves and two little fish – Jesus, who flees from the crowds that want to crown him as king. This Jesus is coming to the disciples, now as the master of the very wind and waves that are threatening to sink their little boat.

Jesus' calls out to the disciples, "I AM," he says. The name of God that Moses receives at the burning bush. In the Gospel of John, Jesus uses this phrase – I AM...I AM – over and over again to help his listeners understand who he is. Jesus is not just a good man, not just a teacher, but the Christ, the Word who was with God in the beginning, the Word through whom all things were made, the Word who IS God. Jesus, the Great I AM.

In this powerful moment on the Sea of Galilee, when the disciples are rowing with all their might against the darkness and wind and waves that are threatening to overwhelm them, Jesus simply says, "I AM; do not be afraid;" and with those words, the fear that has consumed them simply flies away. They recognize Jesus, not as the earthly king that the crowd wants him to be, but as Emmanuel – God with Us – coming to them across the chaos of darkness and wind and water out of which the whole creation was formed.

The disciples invite the king of heaven into their little boat, and then suddenly (the Bible says “immediately!”) they are no longer rowing against the wind, but instead they have somehow come to shore, landing exactly where they are supposed to be. Imagine the praise they sing to God for that deliverance.

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I really love this story, because we can understand it on so many levels. It’s not just a story about Jesus and the disciples, not just a story of Jesus demonstrating that he is one with God. It is also a story about each of us personally; and it is a story about this church, and about every church.

We have all had times in our lives when we felt like we were rowing against the wind – when we have given it everything we have and are just getting nowhere – when we are in danger of sinking. This story tells us that when we are aware of the presence of Christ, the creative power that moves heaven and earth, then the storms are still there, but somehow, we don’t need to struggle against them anymore, and we don’t need to be afraid. I’ve had moments in my life like that. Have you? Moments when I was sure I was about to sink. But Jesus is not out there somewhere. He is in the boat with us. We will get to where we need to be, despite the storms. The storms are still there. They don’t go away. But we don’t need to be afraid, and we don’t have to struggle anymore because we can see Jesus in the boat with us. He won’t let us sink. He will get us to shore.

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To understand this story on another level, you need to know that for the earliest Christians, the ones for whom the Gospel of John was written down, a boat was a symbol for the Church. Sometimes they drew little boats to identify themselves secretly to other Christians. We call this part of the church where you are sitting and I am standing a “nave,” as in “navy,” because it represents a boat.

The earliest Christians saw the church as a boat carrying human souls to safe harbor. Isn’t that a beautiful image? So, whenever you hear a Bible story – any Bible story – about disciples in a boat, think “church.” This passage about the disciples in the storm was a parable for the earliest churches and it is a parable for us today. So, listen to this story again, and when it tells of disciples in a boat, think about THIS church.

After Jesus has fed the 5,000, he goes up to the mountain to get away from the crowds, and the disciples get into a boat to cross the Sea of Galilee. When they are right in the middle of the sea, a fierce storm blows up. It is too late to go back, too far to go forward, and there is nothing to do but pull together and row against the wind. They grasp the oars with both hands and pull and pull and pull until every muscle is spent. They cling to their tiny boat for their very lives. Suddenly they see Jesus coming to them across the water – Jesus, their friend and teacher – now Jesus, the master of the wind and waves, who says simply, “I AM. Do not be afraid.”

Can you see it? Can you recognize yourselves as disciples, pulling together to keep this church going? This church – like every church – has faced some pretty serious storms in its past, and there will be storms again in the future. No matter what storms come along, this little boat, this church, and all of us are in the hands of the Great I AM, the creator of heaven and earth, the one who has loved us from the beginning of time.

The Gospel of John tells us that when the disciples recognize Jesus, not just as friend and teacher, but as the very face of God, they invite him into their boat, and then suddenly they are no longer rowing against the wind. Instead they have somehow come to shore, landing exactly where they are supposed to be. When we recognize that Jesus is right here in this church, then we truly can be a boat carrying all of these souls to safe harbor.

Whatever storms are blowing in your life right now, even if it feels like the chaotic power of the whole universe is raging against you, you are not alone. And if we in this church keep our focus on Jesus, the great I AM, we can rest assured that he will get this church and each of us safely home.

Amen.