

WALKING ON THE WATERS OF CHAOS
SIGNS OF LIFE: WHY CHURCH MATTERS – WATER
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The collect uses the image of the waters of chaos – isn't that apt for us right now?
COVID-19, tornadoes at midnight, a political arena that resembles a bar fight,
skittish stock markets, and wars, bombings, yikes.

What's a body to do to deal with all this?

As we deal with chaos, we need to make a choice:

One choice is to protect ourselves literally all costs,
encasing ourselves in physical, spiritual and psychological hazmat suits,
hoarding supplies, not caring if others have access to what they need,
and becoming like a snarling dog protecting a bone.

The other choice is to be smart, but continue to live according to the Golden Rule,
to take care of each other and protect the most vulnerable, and, for us in an Episcopal Church,
to consider DAILY the way of life set out in our baptismal covenant.

How fascinating that long before COVID-19 was unavoidable news

Cindy and I chose these particular lessons for our Lenten series,
because the lessons from an old, venerable book are all about today's choices:
between ME or WE, Pessimism or Hope, Panic or Peace, Doubt or Confidence.

Yesterday, I read a fascinating interview about how pandemics change history.¹

Professor Snowden noted that viruses exploit weakness not just in one human,
but in entire cultures. It's a matter of logic, of how survival of the fittest
begins by decimating the weakest.

When human cultures create large populations of people
who do not have access adequate food, shelter, and care,
viruses will take hold in them and spread freely.

The viruses often strengthen in that process, so when, inevitably, healthier folks are exposed,
THEY are now more vulnerable than if the virus never really got started
because the first people exposed never got really sick because they were healthy.

Healthy people are much more likely to survive, and the time to prevent a problem for many
is by making that there are as few susceptible, weakened human beings as possible.

All this must be in place long before the first sneeze.

So a pandemic exposes the fault lines in cultures
that permit large classes of people to be poor and vulnerable.

Professor Snowden noted something else about cultural attitudes to disease.

During the Black Death in the 14th C, long before we knew about germs,
the Church insisted that its members face the reality that they could die quite suddenly,
and to ask themselves the big questions about how they chose to live,
and whether they were prepared to die.

Personal observation by this parish priest is that people who have faced their own mortality
and made peace with their God, their family, and themselves,
approach their last breath with thanksgiving for what they've had,
and, most importantly, face the next step without fear.

¹ <https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/how-pandemics-change-history>

That's what our lessons are about today: in the midst of chaos,
 making choices on how to live, facing our fears about both living and dying,
 and finding that precious place of community, peace, hope and confidence.

First, the lessons teach that we must acknowledge the chaos. It's real.

There are many things we simply cannot control in life;
 everything can change in an instant. It's part of the fabric of creation.

But we don't face chaos alone: the Holy Spirit of God is still brooding over the waters of chaos today,
 still bringing forth all life moment by moment.

The Holy Spirit still works in us, fulling us with amazing gifts,
 empowering us to face any kind of chaos.

For those of us in the Church, we have a very clear direction shown to us
 in the life, death, and life beyond death of Jesus, God with skin on.

We are to call on the Lord and follow the thoughts and ways of God,
 and doing so will make us like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit.

Trees don't eat their own fruit, do they? No. The fruit feeds other creatures, helping them prosper.

Following God's thoughts makes it clear that God is not about ME but WE.

We are about WE, the common good, doing what's best for the other,
 not self-protection in a way that costs others,

In the Book of Acts, we read about the Ethiopian eunuch.

This person had traveled 2,500 miles to go to Jerusalem to worship – one way.

He may have been an important person in Ethiopia,
 but he would have been barred from even entering the Temple in Israel.

Eunuchs absolutely were not permitted into the Assembly of the Lord.²

Yet the brand-new of the Messiah of Israel, through Philip, reaches out to the eunuch:

Come as you are. All are welcome. No exceptions.

With joy, the Ethiopian enters the waters,
 dies to the ways of rejection, oppression, and pessimism,
 rising to live in the promises of the Reign of God joyfully, filled with hope.

Then, dear Peter. He calls out to his Lord in the night, his Lord responds,
 and Peter confidently steps out of his boat onto the wind and water.

HE BEGINS TO WALK ON WATER.

This, of course, is not really possible, is it? He knows better.

As a lifelong fisherman, he also knows about strong winds and big waves,
 and the chaos they can bring to a boat, let alone a lone human being.

His confidence evaporates.³ He panics. He doubts himself.

Peter doesn't doubt Jesus, Peter panics and doubts himself,
 his ability, with the help of God, to face the chaos.

This is terrible, of course, but then Peter does something very right:

he asks for help. It's so HARD for many of us – especially those of us
 who know where our next meal is coming from and have a roof over our heads –
 to ask for help, or even to receive an offer of help.

We hate being dependent, needy, vulnerable!

Peter knows he NEEDS HELP and he calls on the Lord while he is near
 (there we are, right back to our text from Isaiah!).

Peter calls for help, Jesus gives it, the panic ends,
 and Peter and even the rest of the guys in the boat have God's peace.

² Deuteronomy 23:1

³ Rob Bell, Nooma Video No. 8, "DUST"

Peter's confidence grows day by day, until he is so strong in the Lord that he is able to face the chaos of death for the sake of the good news about Jesus. Based on these lessons, finding ways to use our beans this week should be pretty easy.

One way would be to come to the Last Things First workshop at 11:45 and take seriously the wisdom of having a prepared death.

Another way is to use the Signs of Life calendar and the Prayers of the People in your bulletin to look for opportunities to choose God's thoughts and ways as we go about our daily lives. Each day, as face the chaos of life, we will need to choose ME or WE, Pessimism or Hope, Panic or Peace, Doubt or Confidence.

To make this daily choice, call on the Lord, who is near;
remember that the Holy Spirit still broods over creation,
the Spirit that can, does and will empower us with everything we need
to walk on the waters of chaos each and every day.

COLLECT OF THE DAY:

Ever-creating Spirit, who brooded over the waters of chaos and brought forth all life from them: We thank you for the wondrous gift of water through which we die with Christ and are raised by you to the new life of grace; and we pray that we may ever be faithful stewards of this gift and make it available, clean and pure, to all living beings, that in so doing the springs of living water promised by Christ Jesus may well up in every human heart; through Jesus our Savior, who lives and reigns with you and the Father, one God, now and for ever.

ISAIAH 55:6-11

Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."

PSALM 1:1-3

Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked,
nor lingered in the way of sinners, nor sat in the seats of the scornful!

Their delight is in the law of the LORD,
and they meditate on his law day and night.

They are like trees planted by streams of water,
bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither; everything they do shall prosper.

ACTS 8:26-40

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means "queen of the Ethiopians"). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it."

Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked.

"How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading: *He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.*

The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. As they traveled along the

road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?" And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

MATTHEW 14:22-33

Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone, and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear.

But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

"Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water."

"Come," he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus.

But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him.

"You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?" And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

SEQUENCE HYMN: *Praise the One Who Breaks the Darkness*

BLESSING:

Our Triune God gives us the signs of life, equipping, empowering, and strengthening us to become disciples of Christ Jesus. God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, bless you today and throughout these forty days.