

“Wind, Waves, and Good News”

Romans 10:8b-15; Matthew 14:22-33 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – August 9, 2026

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might keep our eyes on
you and follow wherever you lead. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*

As I was reading the Matthew passage suggested by the lectionary for this week, I realized that I'd preached on this before. I mean, probably more than once. But the one time in particular that came to mind was just about this time of year, 25 years ago. It was my second visit to Alabama. The first time, I had only met the search committee. But that weekend in August, I met the whole congregation and preached their Sunday service. And this was the passage, though I'm not sure how since the lectionary math doesn't add up right. Perhaps we can just agree that this story has a powerful word for the moment the church is in.

And yes, I said “is in,” not “was in.” Because in so many ways, the church is still in the same moment it was 25 years ago. People have been telling us that “the church” is “in decline” my entire career. And if we let our eyes lock onto the roiling waters around us, it can be hard to see anything else. That was as true 25 years ago as it is now. It ebbs and flows, of course, like the tides. In a moment like today, when we're reeling from our third loss in as many Sundays, the future can seem especially precarious. But that looming fear of fading away has never been very distant.

Still, I can't help noticing: we're still here. And it's not because we circled up, grabbing the last couple of life preservers we could find and holding on for dear life. We're still here because God is faithful. We're still here because instead of focusing on the roiling waters, we listened to what Jesus was saying: feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, encourage the down-hearted. As I think over the last 25 years, and especially the last 15, I see so many moments that ought to have been impossible – projects a small group of people had no business attempting that brought joy and love and hope to others. Because we're not just a small group of people; we are church, and God is faithful.

Even in the midst of this season of grief, we had a joyous couple of hours on Thursday, when we shared frozen treats with a bunch of our neighbors and exchanged waves and thumbs up with a whole lot more of them. We had a wild and chaotic day at Welcome Saturday yesterday, and in the midst of that, I was still able to make and share paper cranes with many of our guests, giving them a tangible symbol of peace to take with them. This past week, as every week over the past few years, this building was busy with activity pretty much every day, with twelve-step groups and others gathering to help one another grow; this in contrast to a building that was only occupied two days a week fifteen years ago. We're still here. God is faithful.

It seems a little ironic that the moment we're in now seems so similar to the circumstances the church was in 25 years ago, when I could also make the argument

that the historical moment during which I interviewed for my first pastorate was, in fact, a different historical moment than the one in which I started that job two months later. I interviewed the first weekend of August, 2001. I started the position on October 1, 2001. I arrived in town to move in on September 11, 2001. In between interviewing and beginning in my new position, I went from being a fresh-faced 25-year-old to being “26 and on my own,” as we used to describe it when I was growing up and we wanted to do something we weren’t allowed to do. But more importantly, the world shifted.

These past 25 years, we’ve been learning what it means to live under growing levels of militarism, surveillance, and polarization. Movements for liberation have made progress, but backlash against the crumbling of cultural uniformity has been brutal. So one framing of this story could ask what those metaphorical roiling waters even represent. Is the church tempted to freeze with terror in a boat, sinking down in the waters because we’ve become obsessed with our own decline? Or are we struggling to keep our heads above water and our hope intact in the face of a world in turmoil? What would it look like to keep our eyes on Jesus in such a multi-layered situation? What would it look like to keep our ears open for the voice of God in the midst of such a perfect storm?

I want us to turn to those verses from Romans for just a moment here, because I don’t want to leave them unaddressed. Too many people have been hurt or

disillusioned by churches that read those words and decide that following Jesus is about saying the right words, like this is some kind of magical spell. Paul does, indeed, call us to “confess with our lips” and “believe in our hearts,” so you can see how they got confused. But what does it mean to confess something with our lips? What does it mean to truly believe something with our hearts? If the things we’re saying don’t match our actions, our words are false. If we believe something in our hearts, it means we’re giving our hearts – our energy, our resources, our time – to bringing that vision to life. Belief in Jesus is not an incantation; it is a way of life. The confessions of faith we make with our lips are not about espousing the right ideas; they are about naming why we’re living the way we’re living, why we’re giving the things we’re giving. The beliefs we truly hold in our hearts are the values that guide our choices and our behavior; they are reflected in our actions.

This story from Matthew, in which Peter suddenly becomes very concerned with his own physical salvation for a moment, is surrounded by stories of feeding hungry people and healing those in need of help. He may have stepped out of the boat for personal, spiritual reasons of his own; but Jesus is inviting us to step out of the boat, not as a personal test of faith we each must pass on our own, but because there is a whole world in need out there that we can’t reach if we stay safe in the boat. How can they hear the good news without someone to proclaim it, Paul asked. And how can anyone proclaim the good news unless they are sent out to do so?

As it turns out, the moment in front of the church is always the same: the world is full of brokenness, and we are called to help mend it. We are not equipped to do that with the mechanisms of cultural power and influence; instead our tools are compassion, humility, welcome, joy, empathy, wisdom, patience, and hope. If it didn't feel like we're making it work by the skin of our teeth, I'm pretty sure that would be a sign that we'd strayed from the path. Because it doesn't work because we're doing it right; it works because God is faithful. It doesn't work because the storms aren't real; it works because we keep our eyes on Jesus. It doesn't work because we tell people their problems don't matter; it works because we show that we're willing to sit down with them in the mess and listen.

When I was called and sent to proclaim the good news 25 years ago, that was only a little different than however it happened to you. The good news is for all of us to share. The storms impact us all, not necessarily in all the same ways, but everyone's getting wet to some degree. What I have seen God do in the last 15 and 25 years is proof enough to me that the storms will not have the last word. Times are rough, right now especially, on many levels. But take heart, my friends! God is not done using Christ's church to set things right and bring healing and hope to those sitting in the shadow of death. We are not called to cower in boats. We are called to proclaim good news. May we step forth with bold faithfulness. Hallelujah and Amen!