7-25/26-20 Armor Up with Faith Rev. Amy Haines

MT 14:22-33 Armor Up Series

Walking, driving, or on a boat—have you ever been caught in a storm, battered by wind and waves?

I can remember several instances when I got caught in a rain storm while driving along the interstate. Rain coming down in sheets. Brake lights all around me.

Wipers on high unable to keep up. Most of the time I slowed down and kept going, because it was impossible to see clearly in order to pull over.

I can remember also walking between buildings in seminary, during a Chicago winter snow storm, when the wind was strong enough to literally push a person from building to building.

The year 2020 has been personified as a storm, a storm that you think is lessening but then picks up speed to hit again. Yet this storm is more than wind and waves.

This storm is relational and personal. This storm affects us body, mind, and spirit.

How do we keep from being pummeled by uncertainty and frustration?

How do we keep from giving in to doubt and fear?

How do we keep from being overwhelmed by grief and anger?

How do we look for the hope of a rainbow that follows a storm?

The only way I know how to handle the storms currently swirling all around us is to live by faith, a faith grounded in hope and lived out in love.

Faith—faith is the characteristic of God that we are called to live by today, a belief and confidence in God’s ways that guide us to stand strong in the strength of the Lord against all that surrounds us.

Today we continue in our summer sermon series, based on the scriptures and themes our children will reflect on this week during our virtual Vacation Bible School, Knights of the North Castle.

Today we are called to armor up with faith as described in Ephesians 6:

“Stand with the belt of truth around your waist,

justice as your breastplate,

and put shoes on your feet so that

you are ready to spread the good news of peace.

Above all, carry the shield of faith so that

you can extinguish the flaming arrows of the evil one.

Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is God’s word.”

 -Eph 6:14-17 CEB

Today we are called to stand firm in faith. To armor up with faith. To take on faith as our shield. To trust Jesus.

Jesus’ first disciples also had to learn how to live by faith, how to trust Jesus, how to believe in who he was and what he was called to do.

Today’s Scripture passage from Matthew 14 occurs as Jesus was grieving the death of his cousin John the Baptist, killed by King Herod. Yet before he had time to be alone to grieve and to pray, a crowd followed Jesus. He had compassion for them, teaching them and healing them. Then, when it was evening, the crowd was miraculously and fully fed through just a few loaves and fish.

While Jesus dismissed the crowd, he sent his disciples ahead of him, putting them on a boat to travel to the other side of the lake. Jesus needed time to be alone to grieve and to pray.

The disciples, however, did not have a calm sailing across the lake. Although most of them were expert fishermen, they spent the night battling the wind and the waves of a sudden headwind, common on the Sea of Galilee.

Exhausted by the events of the past 24 hours, in the dawn of early morning, the disciples were terrified when they saw Jesus walking to them on the water. They cried out in fear, believing him to be a ghost!

Immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying,

“Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

Do not be afraid. How often do we hear those words from God’s messengers throughout the Scriptures? Do not be afraid. God is with us. Take heart. You are not alone. Have courage. God is doing a new thing. Do not be afraid.

Jesus is encouraging his tired, scared, doubtful disciples to continue to armor up with faith.

Yet Peter being Peter, resisted putting on faith:

“Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”

If. The very word smacks of doubt, of needing to test something out.

The devil said to Jesus in the wilderness,

“If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread.”

The religious leaders said to Jesus at Golgotha,

“If you are the Son of God, come down from that cross.”

Here Peter says, with a voice of doubt,

“If you are who you say you are,

command me to come to you on the water.”

Jesus responds simply, “Come.”

Come—an invitation of trust, an invitation of relationship, an invitation to believe that Jesus is who he claims to be.

Come, and believe. Come, and trust me. Come, and do the unthinkable. Come, and walk on water. Peter, to the amazement of his fellow disciples, accepts Jesus’ invitation, steps out of the boat, and begins to walk on water!

Only when he takes his eyes off Jesus, noticing the strong winds and waves of the storm around him, does Peter begin to sink.

Would we be like Peter, wanting to walk on water, or would we be hovered together in the protection of the boat? It’s scary to step out in faith, to armor up and trust in Jesus!

Years ago during a VBS week in Payne, that included this scripture, our science leader invited the kids and crew leaders to literally walk on water. I don’t know how it was done, but a mixture of water and corn starch allowed the kids one by one to literally walk across the top of the water!

Some kids were first in line, spontaneous and excited, much like impetuous Peter.

Others were a little more reluctant, yet after watching for a while decided to try it for themselves. Still others wanted nothing to do it, refusing to even try it, for a variety of reasons.

How often are we like that mix of kids? Some gung ho and enthusiastic to live by faith; some who tentatively take the next step; some who have no interest whatsoever to begin the journey of faith.

Peter trusted Jesus enough that he jumped out of the boat, then began to walk on water! Yet when he realized what he was doing, in the middle of a storm, Peter began to sink and cried out to Jesus, “Save me!”

Immediately, Jesus reached out his hand and caught Peter, saying,

“You of little faith! Why did you doubt?”

Peter was saved. The wind ceased. And the disciples worshipped.

Much has been made of Jesus’ response to Peter, insisting that Jesus is rebuking Peter for a lack of faith. Yet, how many of us have ever doubted? How many of us have boldly stepped out in faith then backed up, fearful of where we found ourselves?

Doubt is part of our faith. And so is trust.

I don’t think Jesus is rebuking Peter in the way we often envision. Rather, Jesus is smiling and shaking his head and saying to Peter, like a loving parent,

“Peter, trust me. Listen to me. You’re going to do miraculous things in my name, but don’t push it.”

Jesus is speaking to Peter like a loving parent who proclaims to their child:

No, you cannot jump off the roof like superman.

Yes, you can bike without training wheels.

Go for it. You’ve studied enough to do well on your test.

I believe in you. Trust me.

Trust me. Believe in me. Have faith in me.

That is what Jesus is asking of us here today. Do not be afraid. I am with you.

Take up the shield of faith, to protect you from doubt and uncertainty, from temptation and sin, from fear and evil.

For Romans soldiers, their shields were an important piece of their defensive armor, yet one they had to hold up rather than put on. They had to remain intentional to be protected.

I cannot imagine how heavy those shields were to hold on to. I’ve seen them described as an inch-thick wood, possible 2 ½ feet wide by 4 ft long, wrapped in leather and edged in metal. Shoulder to shoulder, shield to shield in front and over top of them, while the soldiers stayed in formation they were very well protected. Enemies, however, learned to shoot flaming arrows at those shields, for once a soldier lowered their shield to put out the fire, all were vulnerable.

Rome countered the flaming arrows by soaking their leather wrapped shields in water, which would then douse the flaming arrows on impact.

While flaming arrows are not literally flying around us today, we do still need to protect our hearts and minds and lives with a shield of faith, trust, and belief.

Today, we are called to take up the shield of faith to protect us. Our faith protects us from doubt and unbelief, from what would tempt us away from trusting Jesus and what would pull us apart as the body of Christ.

This weekend we celebrate the sacrament of baptism, of God’s claiming and cleansing and calling in our lives, even before we are ever aware of God’s presence with us.

The questions asked of Dan and Jessica are questions asked of any who seek to be baptized, any who bring their children for baptism, any who seek to join as a member of the church.

They are questions that remind us to armor up with faith:

Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness?

Do you reject the evil powers of this world?

Do you repent of your sin?

Will you actively resist evil, injustice and oppression?

Will you confess faith and trust in the grace of Jesus?

When we remember our baptisms, when we claim our faith in Jesus for all the world to see, we are taking up the armor of faith, willing to learn from and trust Jesus, willing to journey in Jesus’ presence among the community of faith, willing to allow Jesus to save us when we stumble and fall.

Living by faith does not mean we will never face the storms of life. We do a disservice to our witness when as Christians we pretend that we never face danger, never doubt, never struggle, never face pain. Doubt and fear are a part of life. But so is hope and grace and faith.

In those moments when we step forward in faith, then falter, remember Jesus is with us. Jesus is reaching out his hand to pick us up, to encourage us, to save us.

Jesus is also offering us once more the gift of community, the gift of the church around us to encourage us and support us, just like we pledge to do so this weekend for Connor and his family.

Members of the body of Christ, are you ready to face this week armored up with faith? Trust in God’s claiming. Trust that Jesus is with you. Step forward in faith.

And assist one another to live by hope and grace.

Put on the armor of God. Live by faith, by trust, by justice, by peace, by love, by prayer. These are God’s ways for our lives, as the body of Christ, the church in this world.

May it be so for all of us. Amen.