I had a Zoom call with my roommate from the pilgrimage in Spain a couple of days ago and she reminded me of a poem by Victoria Stafford shared at the end of the pilgrimage. Stafford wrote:

Our mission is to plant ourselves at the gates of Hope–

not the prudent gates of optimism which are somewhat narrower

not the stalwart, boring gates of common sense;

not the strident gates of self-righteousness,

which creak on shrill and angry hinges

(people cannot hear us there; they cannot pass through)

nor the cheerful, flimsy garden gate of

“everything is gonna be all right.”

But a different, sometimes lonely place,

the place of truth telling,

about your own soul first of all and its condition.

The place of resistance and defiance,

the piece of ground from which you see the world

both as it is and as it could be

as it will be;

the place from which you glimpse not only the struggle,

but the joy of the struggle.

And we stand there, beckoning and calling,

Telling people what we are seeing

asking people what they see.

Today is a perfect day to ask what we see. Our scriptures today are about seeking God in times of challenge or trouble; they bring us to a meeting point of mystery and miracle. *Mysterion*/mystery comes from the Greek. Paul uses it in several letters to reference the hidden and complex nature of God. The scriptures are full of inklings–hints, clues, and hunches about God–mysterious notions of the Divine for us to ponder.

Miracle, is not from either of the ancient languages so it’s not a concept in the original texts. It entered into the religious vocabulary through Latin and the development of the church. Each lectionary year we come through Eastertide, Pentecost, and Trinity Sunday and enter Ordinary Time. And it is through these summer months, that we hear about Jesus’ teachings on how to find the Kin-dom of God. And then we hear the stories of Jesus raising the dead, healing the sick, feeding great crowds, and walking on water. As time has passed, it seems more difficult for folks to find a way to hold these, so called, “miracle” stories.

In the 60s and 70s, pastors started interpreting the feeding stories with the suggestion that once Jesus and the disciples blessed and passed the few loaves and fish, everyone else in the crowd who had some food with them began to share it; all the Trail Mix and LaraBars came out of pockets and backpacks to be shared. But this doesn’t get us around the blind regaining their sight, the lame walking, or the woman with the flow of blood not only being healed but being restored to life in community.

So it’s important to realize that the Bible doesn’t contain the word or concept of “miracle” but has, at it’s center, the power of God. The problem with referencing some few acts in the scriptures as miracles is that they are now understood as sporadic, supernatural events rather than a part of the nature of the Divine. Fear and awe are the same word in the Hebrew and that is much more nuanced way to think about God.

Because in our gospel passage, the disciples are not afraid of the storm, they are afraid of Jesus. This image of Jesus walking across the waters is as startling or frightening as seeing the Transfiguration. By now the disciples have seen Jesus do many, many wondrous things–but this is different–it is the kind of phenomenon that, in the ancient Hebrew/Roman culture, would be attributed to magicians, the jins, or what we now might call the Dark Side of the Force.

Our English translation sounds like a simple reassurance, “don’t worry it’s just me,” but, in the Greek, he uses the phrase, “I Am,” the words from the Greek translation of Exodus when Moses asks God what God should be called, and God answers, “I Am Who I Am.” Jesus says, “Take heart,” I AM is here: God is here; “do not be afraid.”

When the hurricanes come, the winds are more frightening to see and hear but it’s the water that takes lives; the storm surge, high surf, flooding, and rip tides are the most deadly aspects of the storm. Chapter 1 of Genesis makes this clear from God’s own struggle to hold back the waters to create dry land; we see it through the flood with Noah, and Pharaoh’s crossing the Red Sea. Our fear of the water is well-developed and well-placed. In spite of human DNA, and even though the disciples, some of whom are fishermen, have been battling the waves through the night. Even though they have a powerful respect for the deeps, it is the sight of Jesus they find frightening. And then, Peter, for all his flaws and misjudgments, gets the inkling to get out of the boat. He checks the impulse by addressing the fearful Mystery before him: “If it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” And Jesus says, “Come.” And this is still our calling; if we offer, Jesus beckons us to get out of the boat.

Which means that following Jesus is about facing our fears and addressing our vulnerability. We are trying to ride out the night of so many tempests in our current time when what we really need to do is to get out of that boat–do something different.

The waters are literally rising and we must do something radical to change our environmental trajectory. I’ve shared this quote from environmentalist Gus Speth before, but it is still apropos, *“I used to think that top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. I thought that thirty years of good science could address these problems. I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy, and to deal with these we need a cultural and spiritual transformation. And we scientists don’t know how to do that.”*

We are going under, all around us we experience droughts of kindness, squalls of guns, the storms of rage against those on whom we have cast our fears. It is time to practice the way of life Jesus taught. It is time to say, “Jesus save us!” He needs our vulnerability. Even the great Hebrew prophet Elijah had to learn the lesson of the power of God, he had to learn to stop running and listen for God.

What will it take to ready ourselves for deep spiritual and relational work with God and each other to change the trajectory of the rage, selfishness, greed and apathy? What will it take to step into the discernment and prayer needed to make our way through? I return to the words of the poem as it describes the ways we repeatedly try to address the storms we are facing: through “the gate of optimism” through “the stalwart gates of common sense;” “through “the strident, creaky, and angry gates of self-righteousness,” or the cheerful gate of “everything is gonna be all right.” We return to these even though we know none of these is really working anymore.

If we reframe this conversation from Jesus’ point of view, we might ask ourselves, What risks have we taken? For example, what relationships have we formed and nurtured, through which we have risked sharing our true self? How many close and intimate friendships and relationships have you nurtured through the years? Have you risked marriage or risked marrying again? In all of these, we’ve gotten out of the boat. Sometimes, getting out of an ill-fitting or abusive marriage becomes a form of walking on water. And whether some of us chose to be single or singleness chose us, it takes courage to believe both that we belong in the boat and that we can get out and walk. If you’ve had children, bought a house, made the leap of faith into a new job, or put your whole heart into a new venture, you've followed the calling to get out of the boat.

So many here have faced the death of parents, a sibling, or dear friend; you are walking on water. Too many here are living beyond the death of a spouse and/or a child; you are walking on water too, but not alone. There is a supernatural phenomenon in congregational life where we get out of the boat but we are not alone. Did you once or are now moving ahead into cancer treatment or a difficult chronic diagnosis? You’re walking on water. These later instances may not have felt like a choice to get out of the boat, but think about how brave you have been. Do you or someone you love, know the feelings of peril when getting up, getting dressed, and leaving the house in spite of depression? Do you know first hand the day to day, sometimes hour to hour struggle to stay afloat in Recovery? This takes courage my friends! Choosing life is a spiritual practice of getting out of the boat then asking for and receiving help.

It makes more sense to the rational self to use all our powers in service to human institutions and processes–to try to make them right and help them serve the greater good. But we are not getting any closer to the shore no matter how hard we row. Most of the disciples stayed in the boat, we can be good disciples staying in the boat, but then what do we do with this sinking feeling?

Both of our readings today bring us to the meeting place of Mystery and power; not just raw power like tanks, dictators or street gangs but Divine Mystery aligned with power. There is a plan. It is in progress. We have an invitation to join in.

So, I return to the poem, I believe that “Our mission is to plant ourselves at the gates of Hope . . ..” It will lead, first to a “sometimes lonely place, the place of truth telling,” and evaluating the condition of our souls. The soul is a source for those inklings–those hints, clues, and hunches about God and calling–which are a touch of mystery that is naturally supernatural. For the soul, inklings of God are learned, expected, likely, innate: natural. But not human – there is a power greater than ourselves and while we may never fully understand God and God’s power, we are invited to engage with it as the saving grace that it is. We do not need more vacuum cleaner technology, higher speed internet, or more luxury in our cars as much as we need to create relationship here in the boat we call St. Paul, or the United States, or planet Earth.

And when Jesus asks us to “see the world both as it is and as it could be . . ..” it is an invitation come, to lean into that calling. Thanks be to God.

Amen.