

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of all times and places, we gather here this morning incredibly thankful for your sustaining grace. There are so many moments when the waves of life leave us feeling like we are overwhelmed and even drowning. We worry about our health, or the health of our loved ones failing, our financial ups and downs, our struggling relationships, and what the future may or may not hold.

This week we have once more been inundated with difficult news. We pray for those who have been affected by Ida and the tornadoes and devastating floods. We pray for those in Afghanistan who are facing violence and war. We pray this Labor Day weekend for those who labor on our behalf, those who find their jobs untenable, those who cannot find sustainable work, and those who are unable to work. We pray for John Heinz who has been hospitalized in Philadelphia and everyone who is sick, struggling, or grieving. Lord, we name them in our hearts before you now...As we approach the 20 year mark of the terrible events of September 11th, we pray for peace and healing here and around the world. Where there is hate, let us sow love. Where there is violence, let us sow love. Where there is grief, let us sow hope.

And as we remember the terrible events of that day, we are aware that the storm of COVID 19 continues to hit everyone hard today. Remind us that we are in this together with You and with one another. Encourage us to stop looking at the storm and to start looking to You, the One that even the winds and the waves obey. Remind us today and always that you provide boards of safety to hold on to through our difficulties and that you often call us to be that grace for one another. Continue to build up your church

here at First UMC of Moorestown that we might share your grace and Good News with our neighbors. We pray all of this in the loving name of Christ, the one who was, and is, and will always be our Savior. Amen.

SERMON

This morning we are continuing our Daring Greatly sermon series and today we hear about one of Paul's journeys upon the sea where he talks about what it means to Fear Not while he dares greatly for the Lord. Before we hear our Scripture this morning, I want to give a little context of what you are about to hear...Paul and some of his Christian friends are prisoners for preaching the good news of Christ. It has been decided that Paul needs to testify before the emperor, so he and his friends are being transferred to Italy via ship. But before the boat departs Paul, according to chapter 27 vs 10 says "Sirs, I can see that the voyage will be with danger and much heavy loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives."

After several days of storms, harrowing situations, and a time when they need to start throwing cargo overboard, Paul says "Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and thereby avoided this damage and loss. ²² I urge you now to keep up your courage, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. ²³ For last night there

stood by me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, ²⁴ and he said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before the emperor; and indeed, God has granted safety to all those who are sailing with you.' ²⁵ So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told."

And then after 2 weeks of a disastrous sailing venture we come to our Scripture of the day...

JIM/JOHN READS SCRIPTURE

This Scripture has become increasingly significant for me during COVID.

For me the church has been a vessel of safety as I travel through life.

(SLIDE OF BOAT) The church has been a ship of sorts where I know the crew and fellow passengers and call them my church family. The church has been a place, or variety of places, that become a familiar second place that I call home. And the church for much of my life has been the boat on which I am carried to continue doing the work God has called me to do.

But then, like Paul faced, an ongoing, dangerous storm, has really challenged the safety and security of the ship I love. The storm in Paul's day was a northeaster and it battered his ship for 14 days before finally destroying the ship altogether. The storm in our day is a pandemic called COVID and it has lasted around 19 months (SLIDE OF STORM

FORCAST) and may be around for longer. Like Paul's storm, our COVID storm has been battering the ship of the church. Not just our church here in Moorestown but the Church of Jesus Christ that is spread to every corner of the world.

Like the sailors we have been trying to throw our cargo overboard to stay afloat and manage the storm as best as we can. We have pivoted quickly and offered online worship, meetings, and small groups. We have created policies and procedures and we keep adapting and revising them to keep our congregation safe. We have prayerfully navigated varying strategies and opinions of what should be done, and how it should be done, and as best as we can we have strived to be a safe place and space to carry us through this storm. First church has been committed to weathering the storm by participating in person and virtually while remaining committed to growing in the faith and living our faith in the world.

For the last few months, I have read this Scripture over and over and there are three main lessons I have been wrestling with and I challenge you to wrestle with as well.

The first is that as much as we may love the ship of the church we sailed on prior to the pandemic, we have to name and acknowledge that that church is forever changed. (PPF SIGN SLIDE) The church will never go

back to the way it's always been. In many ways that is really hard news because most of us loved that old ship and are thankful for all the journeys it took us on as we grew in our love of Christ. When you look at church history there is some kind of major reformation approximately every 500 years. These reformations are what took the church from being a fringe group meeting in caves and living on the margins to the dominant faith of the empire. It is what took the church from being Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox to having a strong branch of Protestantism. These times of reformation, while difficult and filled with controversy and struggle, have given rise to a strong church and a greater ability to fulfill the mission of Christ to make disciples of the nations. The pandemic is forever changing the ship of the church as we have known it. A new day is being born for the body of Christ. We don't yet know what lies ahead and there will be more changes of what was before we fully know what new thing is being born. Some scholars are saying that we won't know the full effects of the pandemic on churches for a full decade. But certainly churches that were barely floating along are sinking faster, churches that were trying to just drift along hoping that the day people flocked to their church again, are waking up to the fact that that is not working or happening.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, I know that being on a ship while it is being radically changed, I know that is scary and alarming. (DROWNING SLIDE) I know we continue to throw cargo overboard and manage and navigate the best we can and for that I am thankful. I, like Paul, have a strong, God breathed vision that we too will survive the storm but it will not be in the safety and the security of the ship we have always known in the past.

For me this is incredibly daunting. No one likes the uncertainty of this period. No one likes to feel like they are drowning. Especially at night, especially when everyone around you is also drowning, and especially when you are in choppy, deep waters, with no land in sight.

But I find great hope in our Scripture this morning. If you blink or check out even for a second you will miss it but at the end of the Scripture Paul writes “He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and get to land. The rest were to get there on planks or on other pieces of the ship. In this way everyone reached land safely.”

Oh church! (DRIFTWOOD TITANIC SLIDE) What great news to hear that those who had the strength and skill to swim to shore did so and that there was driftwood, or flotsam, or planks from the ship for everyone else to float to shore upon. As Pastor Gina and I have shared, we are both extroverts.

As an extrovert it was incredibly isolating and difficult to be quarantined. It was better when my kids were home but when they went to their dads and it was just me, myself, and I, all day every day for days on end, I struggled. I was in the depths of the sea waters. At the time I was serving the Hamilton United Methodist Church and one of the things I did at the start of the quarantine was create a morning devotional on Facebook Live called Pastor, PJ, and Prayer. Every morning at 8 AM I led a brief devotional. Some mornings (SLIDE OF PPP) I was a scattered hot mess. Other mornings (Clergy Collar SLIDE) I was dressed in my formal clergy collar and ready for whatever the day held. More often than not (SLIDE OF PPP) though I was a hot mess. That devotional time, when about 15 people would log on and comment and pray with me became a piece of driftwood that carried me through the water. I clung to that plank for dear life and knew that it was keeping me from drowning. Each day I wrote down what Scripture I read in this little notebook and tracked 199 Pastor, PJ, and Prayer entries. That was God's saving grace for me through the storm (Driftwood SLIDE). This morning I would invite you to think about what has been your driftwood through this storm? What planks, or driftwood, have you been clinging to that has been getting you through this storm of COVID? Is it learning how to Facetime your grandkids and connecting

virtually with friends and family? Was it drive by Birthday parties? Is it learning how to join us via YouTube and worship with us from your home? Perhaps your driftwood has been picking up the phone and checking in on others? God's grace floats our way in surprising ways my friends. I believe that if we are not looking for those saving planks, they could potentially float right by us without our noticing. As people of faith, going through a terrible storm, it is our responsibility to not only find and cling to the driftwood ourselves but also to help remind others that God's grace is still floating among us even as we head into these uncharted waters. While the ship was forever changed, the remnants, the flotsam, the planks of the church will still save people. These pieces of the church will continue to float and nurture and sustain life.

And my favorite part about this Scripture actually happens right after where our Scripture reading ends. When they all get to shore (ISLAND SLIDE) Paul immediately carries on the mission of Jesus. Paul was not supposed to land on the island of Malta but the storm and ship wreckage took him there. And so Paul jumps on the opportunity to witness to his faith in Christ. He gets to know the people of Malta. He learns their culture and language and builds relationships with the people there. And in this new

land, with his old comforts gone, with his struggling through the waters, he brings forth the light of Christ in a new way.

I have no idea what our new island will look like. I have no clue what the church of tomorrow will look like. But I know like Paul, we will continue to dare greatly and do what needs to be done to carry on the mission of spreading the Good News. I know that a virtual component is here to stay with our online worship attendance average now equal to our in-person attendance average. And, I know that faith relationships and missions and gospel sharing will still be a part of whatever lies ahead. For today, while the ship continues to be radically changing, I am thankful that each and everyone of you are a piece of the driftwood that I cling to and that we are able to cling to one another (SLIDE OF OUTDOOR WORSHIP). I trust that God will see us to land safely and together. I am thankful that whatever new mission lies ahead and that I will carry it out with you my family in Christ. I am forever thankful that through the gift of the Holy Spirit we are together, in person and at home, and that God can take the broken ship and bring new life. And that God can take a broken body (START YOUR COMMUNION SLIDES) and in the act of breaking bread unite us with all the other Christians around the world who look to the floating of grace of God in times such as this. Friends, Christ invites to his table....

