

## RISE, LET US BE ON OUR WAY

Rev. Kate Jones Calone  
Matthew 14:13-21; John 14:25-31

### *Matthew 14:13-21*

<sup>13</sup>Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. <sup>14</sup>When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. <sup>15</sup>When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” <sup>16</sup>Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” <sup>17</sup>They replied, “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” <sup>18</sup>And he said, “Bring them here to me.” <sup>19</sup>Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. <sup>20</sup>And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. <sup>21</sup>And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

### *John 14:25-31*

<sup>25</sup>“I have said these things to you while I am still with you. <sup>26</sup>But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. <sup>27</sup>Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. <sup>28</sup>You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I am coming to you.’ If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. <sup>29</sup>And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe. <sup>30</sup>I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me; <sup>31</sup>but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us be on our way.

I recently heard someone share this interesting fact: movie theaters sometimes conduct customer surveys, primarily to get insight about how to tailor concession sales. One of the questions that apparently has been asked in these surveys is “what is the first thing that comes to mind after the lights go down in the theater, right before the movie starts?” Several years ago, the answers largely had to do with food and drink: Coke or Pepsi being a key data point for researchers. But more recently, when moviegoers are asked about the first thing in their minds when the lights go down, the prominent response is: “where are the exits?”

Both of the readings this morning find the disciples occupied with exits. In the familiar story of the loaves and fishes, crowds of people have gathered around Jesus, following and waiting for him despite his desire to be alone. He’s just heard about the death of John the Baptist, who was beheaded as a gift for the daughter of Herodias. Understandably, Jesus grieves the loss of his friend and cousin, and the reality of his own impending death surely weighs on him as well. Nevertheless, the crowds gather, and so Jesus meets them with healing. At the end of what must have been a long day, the disciples are ready to send the crowds home. Like the ushers who turn the lights up and start cleaning around your feet when the movie credits end, the disciples want everyone to know it’s time to exit.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus is gathered with his disciples at the Last Supper and is teaching them about his own exit from this world. This passage is part of a long goodbye speech Jesus gives to his disciples, and here he is both insisting on the reality that they are all about to face, and reassuring them that the Spirit will continue to be with them even when Jesus himself is not.

But really, what occupies the disciples in both of these passages is fear. Fear that the crowd is still hanging around, that they are hungry, that the night is closing in. And then Jesus says, “*You give them something to eat,*” and so they are responsible, and there simply isn’t enough, and what does he *really* expect them to do? It’s far too overwhelming.

And on top of it all, he keeps saying that he’s not going to be around for much longer. That’s simply too scary to comprehend. *He’s* the one who does the teaching and the healing and the feeding. *He’s* the feature on the big screen. The disciples? They keep things running smoothly, do a little crowd control, and, as a perk, get to see the feature attraction over and over again.

Rev. Dr. Gregory Ellison says that “fear is a constricting emotion.” We see the disciples experiencing that, and understandably so. They’ve left behind their stability, their livelihoods, their families, and familiarity for this great unknown that is Jesus. At every turn they are sorting it out, trying to get a handle on what exactly it is that they are witnessing and experiencing. And, too, they encounter resistance, anger, and rejection. For what? Or more pointedly, for whom? So it’s only natural that they would be afraid and anxious. It is a constant tug: the disciples’ tendency toward constriction. Draw the circle smaller. Send the crowd home. Limit people’s access to Jesus. And remember, on that transfiguration mountaintop when Peter wants to keep Jesus there, in a little house with Moses and Elijah? Peter said, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. I will make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

And yet at every turn, Jesus rejects this constriction. He draws the circle bigger, inviting in sinners and outcasts, the sick and the taxcollectors and the children who were supposed to remain outside. Jesus’ very mission is anti-constriction, a loosening. He teaches the disciples to let go of their fears and let love and faith govern. The people are hungry? Feed them. Children are breaking decorum? Let them come to me. There is trouble and suffering down in the valley? Let’s go there. There’s someone I’m not supposed to see/touch/talk to? I’ll be having a meal with them today. Jesus meets the disciples’ constricting fears and anxieties with expansion.

We are living in a time, it seems to me, when it’s unclear which impulse will win out: constriction or expansion, fear or love. We encounter realities that create tremendous fear. Terror and violence and weapons of mass destruction. Economic uncertainty, job loss, disease. Moreover, there are forces at work that seek to stoke and exploit these and other fears. It is a powerful tool, and one that works by fostering division and mistrust and resentment of those who are different. The German theologian Paul Tillich, who during World War II wrote more than 100 radio addresses that were broadcast into Nazi Germany from the United States, said in one such address to his countrymen and women, “Fear makes people incapable of judgment.”<sup>1</sup>

Throughout scripture, there is a refrain that does not relent. It is a powerful word spoken to the people of God at every moment in that grand story: by the Psalmist, the prophets, and the Son of God. It is a word simultaneously of comfort and of challenge: “Do not be afraid.” It is a whisper in the darkness, a hard-to-describe sense of peace, a perception of embrace. Delivered at a hospital bedside or to a spouse now left to navigate alone; to a parent letting go or a child venturing out; to one stepping into a new job or one who needs to move on. In times of uncertainty or scarcity, big decisions or terrifying realities, this has been God’s word of assurance to the people: *Do not be afraid.*

God tells each of us—because of who God is and because of our relationship with God and because of God’s faithfulness and steadfastness throughout human history—God says to you and to me, when the darkness falls, do not be afraid. God will be with us, and will not leave us alone. That is

---

<sup>1</sup> Stone, Ronald H. and Matthew Lon Weaver, eds., *Against the Third Reich: Paul Tillich’s Wartime Radio Broadcasts into Nazi Germany* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 257.

the promise. Not that everything will always be easy or without pain. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. *Because* Thou art with me. Fear is still present, but God is on our side, so we need not give in to fear. This is the assurance of the Word of God to every child of God throughout time. It is our faith and our hope.

It is, also, our calling. To each of us as Christians, and also to us collectively as the church of Jesus Christ. God calls us into a collective fearlessness. Have *courage*. In the gospel of John when it says, “Do not let your hearts be troubled” and “*do not let them be afraid,*” the literal translation is “let them not be cowardly.” It is all too easy, sometimes, to let our fears and anxieties paralyze us. Or to let our fears be stoked by those who tell us that we need only to protect ourselves, *our* country, *our* church, *our* families.

But *Jesus* says, if people are before you and they don’t have enough to eat, feed them. Don’t be afraid of whether you will run out, or whether you’ll be able to do it again tomorrow. Those worries may be justified. Feed them anyway. In front of you are people who need a place to sleep; give them a bed. In front of you are people who need refuge; welcome and care for them. In front of you are people who are afraid; be with them, stand by them and for them.

Jesus made it clear that the disciples were not just observers or witnesses or ushers for the God show. He said to them, “*you* give them something to eat.” Both now, while I am still here, he said; and also when I am gone. Because you need not be afraid that you are not enough, or that there will not be enough; I am with you always, even to the end of the age. So there is no time for dwelling in that kind of fear: be prayerful and not reckless; listen for God’s Word; and then get on with the work. Jesus told the disciples what would happen to him. They had reason to be afraid; their lives were at risk, their leader was going to die. He told them all this and then he said, “Rise, let us be on our way.” The way of the cross lies ahead; it is where we need to go, despite the risk, despite the cost, in spite of our fears.

These are times, I am convinced, when the very question of who we are as a nation and as the church-at-large is at stake. In answering that question, the choice is put before us: whether it is constriction or expansion, division or love, fear or faith that wins out. The novelist Marilynne Robinson wrote, “fear is not a Christian habit of mind.” The great preacher George Buttrick put it this way: “Fear knocked on the door. Faith answered. There was no one there.”

In just a few minutes, we’ll gather at the table and we’ll break bread together. Just as he did when he fed the crowd—5,000 men, plus women and children. Just as he did at that last meal with the disciples. We’ll remember what he told them; we’ll remember his death, and we’ll insist that in this sacrament we proclaim the saving death of the risen Lord until he comes again. And we’ll be fortified for the road ahead, knowing that even now he walks with us, and so we need not be afraid.

Rise, let us be on our way.