“Why Are You Afraid”
Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

Mark 4:35-41
On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

The theme for this year’s Stewardship Campaign draws its inspiration from a beautiful new piece created by our good friend, the Los Angeles artist John August Swanson. It’s called “The Storm” based on the story we just heard David read from Mark’s Gospel. You’ve seen it if you received your stewardship mailing this week. And I hope you’ll view an interview I conducted with John about this piece that’s available on our website.

Here’s how John describes this piece: “In THE STORM, a group of travelers is caught in a raging ocean. Wind blows back their hair, as rain pours down from violent, swirling clouds into churning, dark blue and green waters. A small child points to a clearing. Disregarding age, gender, ethnicity, and status, all of them support each other, as together they struggle and row to safety through the perilous storm of life.”

In the interview, John told me: “The people in the boat are looking for a place to go where they can be safe…Everyone participates. The whole world is in this boat….It takes bravery and spiritual power—grace and the Gospel” he said, “to move forward….We wonder how it will work out? We wonder how we will fit in?”

Don’t we feel these days like we’ve been caught up in an unforeseen storm? Buffeted by a still surging global pandemic, barraged with the uncertainties of the recent election, concerned about jobs, and the well-being of our children and families…We’re all in the boat, together. We need one another, all rowing, to move forward towards a new future, a place where all can be safe and at peace. Together.

John was inspired by a quote from Pope Francis as he reflected on this story of the storm and the people in the boat. Pope Francis wrote: “We were caught off guard by an unexpected turbulent storm. We have realized that we are on the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented, but at the same time important and needed, all of us called to row together, each of us in need of comforting the other. On this boat…are all of us…we cannot go on thinking of ourselves, but only together can we do this.”

I’ve been amazed at all the ways we as a community of faith have stayed together in faith, service and hope through the storms of these past months. Thank you for your generous giving through it all. Thank you for the many acts of kindness you are doing for neighbors and members of the congregation. Thank you for worshipping together online and for supporting one another in prayer. Thank you for helping others make the technology work for us. Thank you for ZOOM groups and meetings when we so long to see one another’s face. Thank you for wearing your mask to keep one another safe. Thank you for maintaining First UMC as a beacon of healing and hope for all. Most of all—thank you for showing that even though our building is closed, we are the church and we are always open for the business of love, compassion, and hope.
As we make our financial pledge to the ministries and mission of the church in 2021, we are together. Some may be in circumstances that will not make a pledge increase possible this year or for you to continue at last year’s level. Whatever you are able to give is a great blessing.

Others of us will be able to step up our level of support. You, too, are needed now more than ever. The year ahead will be challenging, but we are confident that TOGETHER we will see one another through. Thank you for increasing your pledge or for making a special gift to the church at this time.

The ship of our church is strong and resilient. We have passed through troubled waters many times in our 145+ year history, each time responding with flexibility, creativity, and generosity. The unseen but ever-present presence in the ship is our God who is faithful and true, longing for us to thrive.

In my interview with John, I asked him to describe the vibrantly colored storm clouds in the sky above the boat and its determined travelers. In one you can see what looks to be the sun, still shining bright. It’s light, John said, shines through the rainclouds to reveal rainbows, the full spectrum of light witnessing to the presence of God even amidst the storm. Rainbows. The sign of God’s everlasting covenant, God’s promise to be with us always, even to the end of the age. As John Wesley summed it up in his last words: “Best of all, God is with us.”

We will be sailing in the storm of this pandemic for some time to come, through the holidays and into the new year. We will live into the aftermath of this election, working together to rebuild the frayed fabric of life that unites us, binds up our wounds, and tends to the needs of all. Together, we will carry forward the mission of the church to “Be the Hope” for one and all.

This day we witness Jesus calming the wind and the waves, always saying to us: “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” Do not be afraid, people, he assures us. I am with you. I will give you power to live by faith rather than fear.

And like those travelers in the boat, we are filled with great awe.

We will go forward together! There is strength and hope in generosity, wonderful God-sent power in knowing that we can all contribute to our forward journey. Our presence in the boat, our sharing in the journey, our stewardship testifies to God’s promise for the future. We choose to live courageously, TOGETHER with God in the ongoing creation, redemption, and transformation of the world.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.