

Islands of Sanity Amidst a Sea of Chaso September 13 2020

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Text: Mark 4: 35- 41

I've been thinking about orientation, lately, as we pivot from whatever semblance of summer and turns towards the fall. To be honest though, I'm not feeling orientation nearly so much as disorientation. I'll say that if my mind and heart are oriented anywhere this week, it's towards the West Coast. The images we're getting from media and loved ones of apocalyptic orange and red skies are stunning, seemingly unreal yet utterly sobering, a climate crisis reality check unlike any we've seen to date. Talk about disorienting. My son who lives in Berkeley says he looks out his window and feels like he's on Mars! To bring ourselves back though and to orient ourselves for today though, I invite us to turn East. The very word "orient" prompts this. It comes from Latin *orientem* or *oriens* which means "rising" or "the rising sun" or "the east, part of the sky where the sun rises." It's also rooted in the Latin word of *oriri*, as in origin, which means variously "arise, get up; appear above the horizon, become visible; be born, be descended, receive life, to come forth, take origin." Add to this an ancient tradition in keeping with much religious architecture that churches are oriented on an East-West axis to allow worship leaders or parishioners to face East, or more specifically to the mid-East, to the Holy Land and to our origin story. For today, like everything else, we're off center. We're facing cameras and screens in many directions. But next time you are back in this building, imagine that as you are heading out, you are facing East, across the Common, to our origins as Christians, with eyes raised to following the rising Sun - Sun and the risen Son s.o.n. My question is this, and it's a spiritual one, for all of us: How *can* we orient ourselves as we continue through this profoundly disorienting time? How can we ground ourselves in God's hope and healing as our Mission statement conveys, and in God's wisdom, love, compassion and hope, enough to find our way to the other side of this pandemic, the other side of the upcoming election, or the other side of whatever personal, family, medical or mental health crisis you are in right now. We know those haven't stopped but mostly have only intensified during Covid. And what *about* the other side of the climate crisis? What will be our compass and guide as we encounter the flood and fire this time, let alone, as James Baldwin put it, "the fire next time"? For now, let's continue to look East and check out today's scripture which offers a helpful setting for our questions.

Here we find the disciples navigating their own way to that proverbial other side. Since we know they are the Sea of Galilee, a 13-mile lake in the northeast of Israel, we can bet they are traversing an East-West axis. But trying to align ourselves with them won't get us very far. The storms are raging. The waves are crashing. They are already swamped! They feel like they are perishing. They've lost all sight of anything approaching a shore. Bear with me here, because I'd like to let Jesus keep sleeping for a moment. We'll circle back to his awakening and what follows in a bit.

First, I need some to share prescient insight from writer and organizational consultant Margaret Wheatley. In a piece she wrote awhile back, she described a reality that will seem to most us all too familiar. She writes:

"We live in *VUCA World*, defined by the U.S. military as Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous. Every day we experience disruption, swerves in direction, short-term decisions that undo the future, propaganda, slander, lies, blame, denial, violence. Communities and nations are disrupted by terrorist acts, cumbersome bureaucracies cannot deliver services, people retreat in self-protection and lash out in fear, angry citizens strike back at their governments, leaders stridently promise security and outcomes that they know can't be delivered, tensions between people reach hateful proportions, and confusion and exhaustion sink us into despair and cynicism." She wrote these words in 2017!

She soberly noted at the time that we are living in the “age of retreat.” Retreat from one another, from values that held us together, from ideas and practices that encouraged inclusion, from faith in leaders, from belief in basic human goodness.” She believes that “this cycle is in process and will continue: systems that are failing now will continue to deteriorate. Uncertainty, confusion, and fear will continue to predominate. People will withdraw further into self- protection and strike out at those different from themselves. Corrupt leaders will intensify their false promises, and people will subjugate themselves to their control.” She gets even more bleak when she concedes that “the problems we are facing — poverty, economics, climate change, violence, dehumanization—cannot be solved globally.” Though the solutions are available, she contends that the courage, collaboration across national boundaries, and compassion is not. She concludes: “This world is depressing to contemplate, but it also is the truth of where we are.”

And then she turns it! I won't say she's like Jesus after he wakes up on the boat! She's not that good. She doesn't still the storm, but she does stop the spiral towards despair, first by facing and name what's really going on and then by offering a modicum of agency and choice! A part of me wants to thank her for naming the truth of where we are, depressing as it is. But the questions she asks, and the hope she finds, are this?

“Who do you choose to be for this time?” And then this: “Are you willing to use whatever power and influence you have to create islands of sanity in the midst of this destructive sea”! I find that expression fascinating. Islands of sanity. Though I'm not as convinced as she is that it's all downhill from here, it's certainly seems fair to say it's going to get worse before it gets better, and I find myself grateful for her notion of creating islands of sanity, if only in the meantime, and if only because it feels more within our reach and more achievable.

To be clear, islands of sanity are the opposite of retreat spaces! She's not talking about heading for the Bahamas if you can afford it! She's not talking about protecting our own or creating bunkers of people who think like us and to hell with everyone else. For her, these islands, open islands, evoke and rely on our best human qualities to “create, relate, and persevere” no matter the circumstance. They involve digging into and living out of our deepest values to create “possibility and humaneness in the midst of increasing fear and turmoil?” An island of sanity can be a community of shared values. I bet you can see where I'm going with this. But, Wheatley says, “It can also be an interior space bounded by our integrity: we know who we are, what we value, and what we stand for.”

Let's get back in that boat. The disciples are still feeling swamped, and so are we. I'm always amazed that here, of all places, in the midst of all these wildly crashing waves, we find Jesus asleep. Not freaking out, not bailing out, but resting in something I for one imagine is a deep and trusting sleep! Indeed, sleep in the bible is sometimes considered a posture of trust. The deep sleep of a one who knows exactly who she is, who trusts that God will never leave her, that God is her only security. From that place, already firmly oriented, already having “taken origin” in his maker, Jesus arises, and says “Peace. Be Still!” Regardless of what happens next on the stormy seas, the disciples then and there have a choice! Do they retreat in fear or do they trust his power?

At its base, the story isn't only about Jesus authority over nature. It's about God's power over the forces of chaos and even those great and persistent leviathans of earthly empires! Many scholars even think of this story as somewhat artificial - career fisherman scared to death of a storm not strong enough to wake up Jesus? Really? It's far-fetched. And for us too, its far-fetched to consider that Jesus or God can, as if in a heartbeat, still the storms or quell the fires. But the question before us the same: when the storms of life are raging, do we retreat in fear or despair, can we return in trust to God who is with us come what may? Can we “take origin,” can we return to our best selves and not take every person for fearful every person/family for themselves and instead turn co-create with our fellow travelers a new reality, a new orientation, a new shoreline, whether on an inner or an outer island of

sanity?

What if our best orientation for these times isn't so much in striving to be someone else, or somewhere else, but in returning to who we already are and where we already are, remembering the peace and stillness of God which the world cannot give. How can we navigate these days in retreat from fear and anxiety, and return to our truest selves, our most human and humane of selves, and to the eternal spark within? This is how we find our purpose and direction, come what may, regardless of the latest tweet storm, or even the latest wildfires or hurricane! Whether an inner space or under a canopy of trees! Imagine it, creating islands of sanity, amidst burning refugee camps in Greece, amidst evacuation centers out west, closer to home, here in our Shelter and Friday Cafe. It's already happening if we have eyes to see, people selflessly and sacrificially being human towards each in the midst of extreme suffering! Or even imagine this closer to home, amidst our own days and weeks. I pray that First Church can be such a place for you, that we can co-create these islands virtually if need be, online community that offer a friendly shore amidst the seas of chaos, a zoom call in which to find your bearings for a moment, in which we can together notice the ground beneath and ground of our being. From that place, we can face whatever reality, whatever headwinds, whatever direction.

Fauci has recently reminded us to hunker down! To those instructions, I'd like to suggest another for our VUCA world of Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity!

Hunker down, yes, but we also need to center down, as the great Howard Thurman suggests. I've been contemplating this as I've recently stepped up my daily morning practice of centering prayer. Believe me, spiritual practices have always come for me in fits and starts. I'll ride them like waves for days or seasons until wipe out and wait for the next wave. That said, I've long had a ritual, if you can call it that, of morning reading. Now, I get out of bed before I read! I go and sit in a nice chair, often before I get my coffee. I set a timer and take 10 or 20 minutes for silence before I turn to the day's news. It's become an inner island of sanity for me each day, a time to center down! Yes, extremely hard to do with kids at home, I know. Still, I invite us all to consider how in the coming days and weeks we can create such spaces for ourselves and each other. How will we in the words of the Psalmist let God put our feet on a rock that is higher than we are!

Howard Thurman puts it this way:

How good it is to center down!

To sit quietly and see one's self pass by!

The streets of our minds seethe with endless traffic;

Our spirits resound with clashing, with noisy silences,

While something deep within hungers and thirsts for the still moment and the resting lull.

With full intensity we seek, ere thicket passes, a fresh sense of order in our living;

A direction, a strong sure purpose that will structure our confusion and bring meaning in our chaos.

We look at ourselves in this waiting moment—the kinds of people we are.

The questions persist: what are we doing with our lives?—what are the motives that order our days?

...Where are we trying to go? Where do we put the emphasis and where are our values focused? For what end do we make sacrifices?

....Over and over the questions beat upon the waiting moment.

As we listen, floating up through all of the jangling echoes of our turbulence, there is a sound of another kind—

A deeper note which only the stillness of the heart makes clear.

It moves directly to the core of our being. Our questions are answered,

Our spirits refreshed, and we move back into the traffic of our daily round

With the peace of the Eternal in our step.

How good it is to center down!

Peace. Be Still. First Church! How good it is, indeed, to center down together. To orient ourselves, to return to one another and to God who keeps us ever grounded, growing, acting in love, for as we are about to hear our choir sing, no storm can shake our inmost calm while to that rock we're clinging!
Amen.