The third and fourth grade Vacation Bible School class had prepared to reenact for the closing program one of the Bible stories told that week – Matthew’s story of Jesus walking on the water. On the last day of Bible School all the other kids, teachers, parents, and visitors gathered in the church to hear the children share what they’d learned.

Jimmy, a talkative, bright and energetic third grader was chosen to play the part of Jesus. One of the 4th graders was chosen to play the part of Peter. Sally was the best reader, so she was given the part of narrator. The other students filled in as the remaining eleven disciples, and as helpers to create scenery and props. On closing day, all the “disciples” took their seats in the boat the class had constructed, and Sally began to read the story. “And early in the morning Jesus came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost! And they cried out in fear”. Some of the disciples began to whisper and murmur. A few, in their best outside voices, grabbed each other by the arm as if for support, pointed at “Jesus” and exclaimed, “It is a ghost!”

That phrase - “And they cried out in fear” - was Jimmy’s cue line to move to center stage where he would deliver Jesus’ words. Sally continued, “But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said” – here she paused, expecting to hear Jimmy’s clear response – just like they’d practiced it. The pregnant pause was his cue to say, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

Jimmy was so proud he had been chosen to play the role of Jesus. He had practiced his lines diligently at home, and with his fellow students. He had even memorized Jesus’ words, speaking them with confidence and clarity.

But during the VBS closing, when Sally paused – there was just a long dead silence. Everyone was looking at Jimmy. From stage right their teacher tried to coach him, mouthing the words – “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” But Jimmy was frozen in place there at center stage. He was not looking at his teacher. He was looking around at all the other kids and parents, teachers and visitors whose eyes were fixed on him. Sally tried again, reading the cue line a second time – “But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said . . .” – and again, the awkward silence. Jimmy’s classmates (actually, most of the disciples seated in the boat) encouraged him. “Psst, Jimmy! C’mon, you can do it. Say it, say Jesus’ words.” Dropping his gaze away from the audience, and staring at his shoes, Jimmy said, “O Lord. It’s me - and I’m scared to death!”

There is a bit of African American wisdom that says, “We are always either going into a storm, in a storm, or coming out of a storm.” It’s true of our life these days in what some are now calling “pandemic tide”. Many of us have experienced our gaze being transfixed on things of which we are afraid. The unanticipated winds of change are
We feel the pummeling waves of outrage and anger at injustice; recurrent accounts of violence - blows that wound body and spirit; despair – the result of job and financial loss; grief over the loss of life as we knew it; and the devastating sickness and death wrought upon the world by a killer virus. It feels some days as if the boat of humankind is drifting way off - course, far from any familiar, visible shoreline. We see, hear, and experience for ourselves and in others’ stories the erosion of life’s meaning, purpose, connection and belonging. We sense the frantic search to return to the core values which help us hold fast, persevere, and take care of each other – faith, hope, and love. Trust, courage, and truth-telling.

We are indeed living in a stormy time, friends. They are rough, churning waters out there, and the waves are lapping in over the sides of our boat. This is not a time for saving “face” and trying to go it alone, or for trying to prop up and keep alive the broken, unjust, unhealthy and abusive systems which threaten to undo the fabric of human dignity and freedom. The present stormy chaos is part of the earth’s groaning with the birth pangs of something new being born.

The apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Roman Christians: “For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” This sums up what God is doing in today’s Scripture readings. God is saving, moving toward those who are calling out for rescue, help, deliverance, salvation because they are in over their heads and know they cannot save themselves.

To be human is to be anxious. Biologically, we’re wired for fight or flight. Fear is never far away. It lives in the air we breathe. In these chaotic days, fear is thick as smoke around us. And some days it’s stifling. As part of today’s sermon preparation, I made a list of my own fears. Partly because it’s cathartic to do that. And also because it’s a whole lot easier to hand over my fears to God if I can name them. The list was longer than I expected. While there exists no fear vaccine, no “fear-be-gone” spray, pill, or lotion, my heart is drawn often to Scripture, particularly this verse from II Timothy: “For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.”

Pummeled by wind and waves, drifting away from the shoreline, the disciples heard Jesus’ reassuring words: “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

This gospel story is about God, and God’s power to save as demonstrated by Jesus. We don’t know why Peter gets out of the boat and starts to walk on the water. It seems like an impulsive, overconfident, unprepared or underprepared thing to do. What was he thinking as he swung his feet over the side of the boat and slid into the water? Maybe he did want to make sure it really was Jesus. Whatever his reasons, Peter wanted to get closer to Jesus, and he had to get out of the safety of the boat to do that. Peter moves a few steps toward Jesus, but then notices the strong wind, and starts to sink. Frightened,
yes, but also in faith Peter cries out, “Lord, save me!” Jesus reaches out his hand and catches Peter.

“You of little faith, why did you doubt?” Jesus replies. Or as the paraphrase in The Message puts it: “Faint-heart, what got into you?”

“I wonder if what Jesus was saying to Peter was not that he should have had enough faith to stay on top of the water, but that he should have had enough faith to reach out to Jesus sooner.” (Melissa Bane Servier, in the weblog Contemplative Viewfinder, 8/2/11, “Fear and faith”.)

Faith is not belief in an expected outcome. Faith is trust in another person. There will be times when we turn toward God and call out – “Help, Lord. It’s me and I’m scared to death”. We are never out of God’s sight. Jesus is present and able to offer the assistance we need, and has been with us all along. We can stay focused on the wind and the waves, and our many fears. We can also choose to focus on the out-stretched hand of our Lord. Disciples are those who are learning to call on the Lord as soon as the waves get rough, the winds grow intense, and the shoreline starts to fade out of sight.

Alyce McKenzie reflects about this story: “The fears don’t stay long if our heart is already occupied by someone else. Someone who never stands on the shore watching us suffer, but is always walking towards us on the sea, stretching out a hand to us with healing, forgiveness, and love. Reaching out a hand to us that is both very human, and the very hand of God.” [Online webzine Patheos, “Walking toward us”, August 1, 2011].

“Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” Amen.