“Why Are You Afraid”
Mark 4: 35-41

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From the Pulpit
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Let us pray: God of the stormy seas of our lives, breathe your spirit into the texts and these words. May the words fall fresh on our ears and into our hearts this day. Amen.

In the lectionary text for this week, Jesus is asleep in the back of the boat while the storm on the Sea of Galilee rages. That day, the disciples followed Jesus throughout the countryside as he preached across and now they follow what Jesus commanded “to go across to the other side.” And so they go.

Except they are heading out at night, a dangerous time to be on the water. The Sea of Galilee which is famous for its sudden and violent storms. At night, navigation is hard – darkness and clouds are not good for sailors. That means they have no stars, no visible landmarks. The waves grew higher and the boat starts to fill with water. Usually a well trained sailor could manage, but this situation was beyond their ability to manage or control.

The disciples were afraid. They looked to Jesus. They call out to Jesus, but they find him asleep. They wake him with a question (probably in a frantic voice), “Do you not care that we are perishing?” “Jesus, Can’t you see this is not going well right now and the best thing you can do is
sleep??” With the boat being tossed to and fro, and the deluge of water over the sides, they reach back for Jesus. Come on Jesus----we are expecting you to act, to do something, anything, to calm our fear. Help us!

Jesus wakes up and takes charge of the situation –he calms the wind and says to the sea: “Peace! Be Still!”

Then the wind ceased… Jesus asks them two questions, “Why are you afraid?” Have you still no faith?” They were afraid because it looks as though they were going to drown and it looked like Jesus didn’t care.

**Why are you afraid?** It’s a good question. Jesus doesn’t tell us not to be afraid or that it’s wrong to be afraid. No, he asks, “Why are you afraid?”

The short answer---because there is so much to be afraid of. Some fear being left out or left behind. We fear that the latest tests results will be bad news. We fear not keeping up with our peers. Fear we won’t be able to provide for our children or for our parents in their old age.

I am sure that you can add your own fears to the list.

We have a need for safety and security and few places it seems have that any more. It seems nowhere is safe. Not a boat, not a school, not a church. Even places where God is
supposed to be. Even the spaces where God is actually with us. It seems the disciples were aware of this truth. They knew the boat was in peril and they called out to Jesus. They called out. They called out because they knew they could.  

_They wanted to know that Jesus was with them. They wanted to know that they were not alone._

The list of fears got longer this week....after Wednesday, after Charleston. I haven’t been able to think of much else as I have tried to wrap my head around the tragic event during a Bible study at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. In fact, I didn’t have words this week. I was stunned. Many of you have been thinking about this too-- wrestling with the unimaginable. Who would enter a house of worship, be welcomed with the sign of Christ’s radical hospitality and turn on the group killing nine people?

For me, add to the list the fear of losing a sense of sanctuary. Losing the place where people gather to worship, to pray, to be closer to God. This is the place where we put down that which separates from God. This is the place where we make

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ourselves vulnerable in order to receive God’s care and connect to God’s people. The sense of Sanctuary is LOST.

In seminary, the doors to the Chapel were always unlocked. Any time of day or night, one could enter to seek quiet, to seek the presence of the One who already knew why you were there. It was a place of stillness. It was a place of peace. I remember walking in for after a long week. No one was in there. After 20 minutes, the stress that took me there in the first place seemed to be gone. I felt safe. I was comforted. I could reach out; call out and feel that I was not alone.

Sometimes calling out and reaching back for the One who can provide comfort and assurance is enough to get you through. In their time of fear, the disciples reached out and called out for Jesus.

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Isn’t that what many of us are doing since Wednesday? We are reaching out, wanting to know that God the source of comfort and compassion, of power and might, the God of Mercy will be there to remind us that we are not alone. On this very morning as we gather as other congregations gather and as the congregation gathers at Emanuel AME, we are reminded that we are not alone.
Emanuel AME isn’t any church. Mother Emanuel, as the church is known, is the oldest African Methodist Episcopal church in the South. The congregation was formed nearly 200 years ago by black men deeply involved in the antislavery movement. Prominent people have come from that church, walked through that church, led worship in that church. They were people who helped change the course of this nation’s history. People like Booker T. Washington gave a speech there in 1909, Martin Luther King Jr. in 1962; in 1969, Coretta Scott King led a march from the church’s front steps, advocating for higher pay for hospital workers. Emanuel AME’s essence is activism, which continues today under the leadership of their pastor Rev. Clemeta (y) C. Pinckney, one of the nine killed on Wednesday night.

The tragedy of Wednesday night, affects us all. We are shaken by the horrific act of taking away the security of a sacred space and innocent lives lost to gun violence once again. President Obama said this week that he has addressed the nation fourteen (14) times in the aftermath of a mass shooting, including those assaults on houses of worship.

How does a community go on? How does a nation time and time again go on? How do we? Not by being complacent, but by relying on the reassuring words of Scripture and
placing our trust in God. We follow the challenging path to listen to the stories of the ones most affected, by listening to our neighbors. We do so by standing up and speaking out for the continued injustices that we see and in which we are complicit.

We are reminded of the questions Jesus asks? “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” Jesus was encouraging his disciples in their faith. What do you rely on when the storm approaches, when the news is not good, when you are challenged like you have never been challenged before? Faith.

Faith may not change the storm from approaching or blindsiding us or devastating everything in its path. But faith changes us. Faith allows us to see and know that we can call out and Jesus is with us. We are not alone. He is there. He is present. He can calm the storm. He will not leave us alone.

On Friday, an email came from the United Church of Christ. It came from the Rev. Waltrina Middleton, who serves as the United Church of Christ National Minister for Youth Advocacy and Leadership. Her first cousin, DePayne Middleton-Doctor, was one of the 9 victims of the attack at Mother Emanuel AME church. As she grieves the loss of her cousin, Waltrina writes these words.
C.S. Lewis wrote, "It is easy to say you believe a rope to be strong and sound as long as you are merely using it to cord a box..." But suppose your life depended on that invisible rope that is your faith? Today, the weight of that invisible rope tugs at my trembling heart, and such invisible faith is tested as we walk through the valleys of the shadows of death all around us. We are reassured to fear not evil, but to trust in the rod and the staff for comfort, protection, guidance and perhaps understanding when the morning comes.

Let us come together for such a time as this to the sacred clearing—no matter our faith or practice—and be of one accord in the spirit of love, hope, and healing to seek justice and peace for these and other victims of hatred and violence.

Let us put our faith to action and be more than empty drums that have long lost their melodies or arrangements. Let us remove our instruments from the poplar trees and call the people, the public officials, and, yes, the
church to action to address the festering sores of racism, classism and militarism—as they intersect in this culture of violence. How can we begin to eradicate this evil without acknowledging the realities of racialized policing, hate crimes, and the disproportionate acts of violence against Black and Brown bodies?

Alas, it is morning and tear-filled dewdrops fall fresh upon my face, with eyes watching God and a soulful lament. Our hearts are troubled, but our faith remains steadfast, trusting and believing in the reconciling power of God for the brokenhearted and the oppressed. (UCC, email)

I can’t imagine. How can we imagine their heartache? Faith leaders in Charleston have already come together. The community of Charleston rallies together not to let these events divide but to unite, and to inspire continued dialogue and action.

Many denominations across the country, including the African Methodist Episcopal church call upon “nation’s political leadership, faith institutions and other
organizations in this country to face the reality that race remains a problem in this nation. Together, they will join with other faith communities to stress the need for the United States to face, discuss and meet head on the problem of race in this country. The AME church will not shy away or lessen its commitment to equality and social justice.² Neither should we.

We continue to engage in conversations in our own community. We can be a place where those conversations happen so that the raw and real issues of race and gun violence and the fight for equality remain in the front of our consciousness.

Just as those at Mother Emanuel reach for some stronghold of support in this time of such devastating loss, we reach out...we call out to Jesus...who rests in the back of the boat, Jesus are you there? We reach out to know that he is with us, to know that we are not alone....

We reach out and are assured of God’s never-wavering, everlasting love.

This week I was led to the Psalms for comfort and assurance. Psalm 46 is one of the one I return to better

² www.ame-church.com
understand what it means to trust God. It begins with a bold statement of faith.

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear.”

And the Psalm goes on to mention all sorts of challenging stuff. Though there should be earthquakes, hurricanes, tidal waves, we will not fear. Though the nations may fight, though kingdoms and governments fall, we will not fear.

Then toward the end, the psalmist quotes the voice of the Lord, “Be still and know that I am God.”

Jesus in the boat says to the sea, “Peace, Be Still!”

Those around the church prayer circle on Wednesday night knew those words, you have to believe that. You have to imagine they breathed those words in together, trusting in the One who gave them life. Trusting whole-heartedly in the One who slept in the stern of the boat, the One who called out to calm the raging storm. Trusting in the One for whom death is not the final word.

Friday, I listened to the coverage of the bond hearing for the gunman, Dylann Roof. I was moved by the statements
of some of the victim’s families. They were a testament to their faith. Amidst their sadness, and grief, they offered words of forgiveness.

This is how the New York Times reported on the bond hearing. “It was as if the Bible study had never ended as one after another, victims’ family members offered lessons in forgiveness, testaments to a faith that is not compromised by violence or grief. They urged him to repent, confess his sins and turn to God.”

Here is what some of the family members said. “We welcomed you Wednesday night in our Bible study with open arms,” said Felicia Sanders, the mother of 26-year old Tywanza Sanders, a poet who died after trying to save his aunt, who was also killed.

“You have killed some of the most [beautiful] people that I know,” she said in a quavering voice. “Every fiber in my body hurts, and I will never be the same. Tywanza Sanders is my son, but Tywanza was my hero. Tywanza was my hero. But as we say in Bible study, we enjoyed you. But may God have mercy on you.”

“I acknowledge that I am very angry,” said Bethane Middleton-Brown, sister of one of the victims, DePayne
Middleton-Doctor. But “[my sister] taught me that we are the family that love built. We have no room for hating.”

"I will never be able to hold her again, but I forgive you," a daughter of Ethel Lance said. "And have mercy on your soul. You hurt me. You hurt a lot of people but God forgives you, and I forgive you."3

The members of Emanuel AME offer words from the very core of their faithful lives. They welcome with Christ’s radical hospitality and they forgive with the wideness of God’s mercy. What helps in the midst of the raging seas, in the storm so fierce, is knowing that God’s love and power are greater than any of the challenges we face.

We stand as close as we can to those families of the victims and the community faith and civic leaders of Charleston in this difficult time. We lift up the names of the victims: Cynthia, Susie, Ethel, DePayne, Clementa (y), Tywanza, Daniel, Sharonda, and Myra. We pray. We hold on to each other and to our faith.

We pray. We hold on to each other and to our faith. What helps us through all that is the love and support of God’s people. What helps is knowing that when we call out to God, God is there and we are not alone. Amen.

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