

“Set sail with hope”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 25:14-29

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What do we do when everything feels wrong and uncertain? The Bible is full of such moments...

Noah looked out onto a world that had become violent and corrupt; he feared for the future; he feared for his children. The waters rose, and life as he knew it disappeared.

Abraham took one last look at the land he had always known as home, and set off with his family to journey through distant, dangerous lands on the whisper of a promise.

Hagar carried her son Ishmael on her back, into the desert, away from the man who had abandoned them, and when there was no water left to drink, she cried out to God.

Jacob cautiously approached the brother whose birthright he had stolen, not knowing what vengeance might await him.

Joseph woke to find himself a slave and a prisoner, auctioned off by his own jealous brothers, his life stolen from him.

Moses stood before Pharaoh and his legions, and with a tongue that trembled and twisted, demanded that he let God's people go.

Joshua and his people treaded the Jordan River, not knowing what giants dwelt on the other side.

Hannah fought for a child. David faced Goliath. Solomon built a temple. Ruth loved Naomi. Esther stared down genocide. Isaiah prophesied. Jeremiah bought a plot of conquered land. Job contended with God. Ezekiel sang to dry bones. Daniel walked into the lion's den. A pregnant Mary sang. Joseph adopted. John baptized. Peter and Andrew dropped their nets and followed. A Samaritan woman preached. Lazarus rose. Mary Magdalene went to the tomb. Thomas touched. Paul built a church. John dreamed.

None of them knew what was to come. They faced insurmountable odds. They faltered and made mistakes. They got scared. But they went. They went because they had hope. They had hope that they didn't go alone, but God went with them. They had hope that God loved them and that, no matter how hard the journey, God would be there to surprise them with joy, with life and purpose.

We need these stories right now, as we face a world (and a church) transformed by coronavirus and politics. We need these stories right now, as teachers and children brave a whole new way of learning, and as doctors and nurses walk into hospital rooms day in and day out, and as a

generation passes away from this church, and as swastikas appear on Jewish graves and lynching ropes on trees, and as we face the prospect of not physically being together for Thanksgiving or Christmas Eve.

“It’s all wrong,” Sam says at the end of the *The Lord of The Rings: The Two Towers*. “By rights we shouldn’t even be here. But we are. It’s like in the great stories, Mr. Frodo. The ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger they were, and sometimes you didn’t want to know the end. Because how could the end be happy? How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad happened? But in the end, it’s only a passing thing, this shadow. Even darkness must pass. A new day will come. And when the sun shines, it will shine out the clearer. Those were the stories that stayed with you. That meant something. Even if you were too small to understand why. But I think, Mr. Frodo, I do understand. I know now. Folk in those stories had lots of chances of turning back, only they didn’t. Because they were holding onto something... That there’s some good in this world, Mr. Frodo. And it’s worth fighting for.”

That there’s some good in this world, and it’s worth taking a step into the unknown, in order to find it. God’s out there. Hope’s out there. We just have to be brave enough to go.

That’s why Jesus tells another story today. He tells a story of three people entrusted with wealth (one talent was worth about 15 years’ wages for a working person, so this was a lot of money). Two of the people are bold. They risk the money. They know that their investments pose a danger. But they choose to face that danger on the hope of growing what they’ve been entrusted with. The master praises them, not just because their investments paid off, but because they were brave. The last, however, buries the money to keep it safe. He says, “I was afraid.” He was afraid of what might happen if he risked and lost the money. The master says that even if the man had adventured with the one talent and lost it, it would have been better than doing nothing at all.

Jesus tells this story because he knows we’re all going to face moments when we’re afraid, and the world stops making sense, and we don’t know what to do. We’re going to have a choice. We can dig our heels in and hunker down, try to keep things the same. Or, we can step out in faith. We can take a risk and follow God into an unknown future. We can try new things. Be creative. Have fun, even. We can take what ability and power, what talents, we have been given and use them to grow love, to awaken people to the mystery of God, to let our lives shine.

That’s what I want to ask you to do with me and with this church: step out in faith. None of us could have anticipated this year, and we sure as heck can’t know what’s to come in 2021. We might be frustrated. We might be afraid. We might wish things could just be normal again. But I want to ask you to do something a little crazy, a little reckless, a little like those two people who invested their talents, a little like Noah and all the rest of them: let’s have fun! Let’s imagine different ways of being church, of loving one another and proclaiming the gospel. Let’s pray a lot. Let’s invest in this church to see what surprising and amazing things God will do with it.

It’s why we at Westminster have chosen “Set sail with hope” as our theme for 2021. We are drawing on the book *Sailboat Church* by pastor and former Presbyterian Church (USA) moderator Joan Gray. You’ve heard Jill Fandrich and Rob Schemerhorn talk about it; you’ve gotten materials in the mail. Joan says that we as the church are called, not to be rowboats driven

cautiously by our own power to a predictable destination, but rather to be sailboats. Faith isn't a timid protecting of the status quo. Faith is the thump of the heart, and the deep breath, and the dance of sailing, as the wind catches the sails, and the bow cuts through the waves, and our vessel is swept into unknown horizons.

We sail with the wind. We sail with the Holy Spirit. We sail with God guiding us, empowering us, leading us. And sure, that uncertainty and co-dependency can be scary, but it can also be so invigorating. When we trust the wind, when we trust God, we discover a power we never knew we had. Possibilities open. Resurrection happens.

We face an uncertain future with hope, because we choose to hitch our sails to the wind; we choose to trust that God goes with us.

How will you set sail with hope? How will you invest your talents—your time and energy, your passion and joy, your prayer and worship, your advocacy for justice, your money, even your lament? How will you put them out there into the world, on the off chance that God might do something spectacular with them?

Will you help this church continue to utilize new technologies to worship and connect in new ways? Will you help this church restore its organ and dream of new forms of music? Will you help this church serve domestic violence victims, and feed the hungry, and support Scouts, and advance healthcare for veterans, and empower people with disabilities, and ally with Black and Brown peoples in their pursuit of justice? Will you help this church proclaim a love that encompasses all people, regardless of sexuality or gender identity? Will you help this church spread the gospel, and deepen people's faith, and care for one another in times of crisis? Will you help this church pray better, and worship deeper, and come closer to God? Will you help this church do things we haven't even imagined yet but God has?

I want us to sail like Noah. Adventure like Abraham. Pray like Hagar. Dream like Joseph. Liberate like Moses. Build like Solomon. Love like Ruth. Dare like Esther. Sing like Mary. Follow like Peter. Rise like Lazarus. And hope like Jesus.

That's what you do when everything feels wrong and uncertain. You shove off into this big, wide ocean. You let the wind catch your sails. And you see where God takes you. **Amen.**