

“Uncertain”

Psalm 46:1-3, 10-11; Eccl 7:13-18, 8:7-13;
Matt 4:5-7; **Matt 14:22-33**; John 3:7-8

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The first scripture we read this morning was from Ecclesiastes. Now, Ecclesiastes isn't necessarily one of the most uplifting books. It says it is written by a son of David, a king. Rabbinic tradition suggests it is Solomon. Others think it's probably written a little later. Whatever the case, the author of that book has looked at life and can't see how it all fits together, other than perhaps it's good to enjoy your life, do your work, and live it out. Wisdom can be helpful, but not essential. The passage starts out with "Who can set straight what God has made crooked?" There's a sense that he has that life isn't straightforward. In fact, he goes on to say it's all beyond our comprehension. We can't understand it. It doesn't really leave us in a good place.

The future is kind of that way. How do we understand it? I'm not sure the Psalmist was all that much more helpful, talking about the mountains shaking and falling, the seas raging and roaring, violence in the hills, and in those times, we need to depend on God. In those times we probably *want* to depend on God. But we don't want to think about those times. It's not a really settling kind of thing. But it does say we should depend on God's strength. Of course, we like to think of God as very steady, unchanging. Yet Jesus gives us that verse out of John when he talks about the wind blowing, the Spirit moving, in a way that we don't understand. The wind blows wherever it will, and so are those born of the Spirit.

All of those scriptures, I think, are pretty unsettling and speak to the uncertainty we know. We don't really know exactly what's going to happen tomorrow. I want to suggest that the uncertainty is part of life and we have to learn to live with it in some way. That's what we've tried to do. We look toward the future and try to figure it out from what happened in the past. Science is, in some ways, our attempt to try to figure out how to know what's going to happen. It feels like in the early 1900's we were at a point where people thought: We know how to do it. Between logic and science, we've got it figured out. All we need is a little more computational experience, a little better way of doing it. We just plug in the numbers and we will be able to figure out exactly what's going to happen. The right formula, it will tell us.

Has it happened? There was a lot of hope that we would just be able to figure out the world. I'm going to suggest that if we could have figured out the world it would have probably been pretty straightforward already. It makes me think of the movie *Groundhog Day*. If everything were always going to happen the same way it did the day before, we would probably know it. Even in the scientific community, what we've found is that as they have done more thinking about things and have been able to use computers to check things out, they found this thing called chaos that's got a theory around it. More recently, there are things like emergent phenomenon and complex adaptive systems. All of a sudden there are all these ways of thinking that suggest that

maybe Ecclesiastes was right—we can't know it all. We can't completely understand what's going to happen the next day. So what do we do?

One of the things we might do is think about the probabilities. I work with them a little bit myself. I think about my next day. I think about what I'm going to do. I thought about what I was going to do this morning. I had it all mapped out. What I found out is that I have about a 5% probability of actually doing exactly what I thought. This morning was no different – a little more unusual than some. How about you? Can you predict exactly what you will be doing tomorrow?

It makes me think about *Star Trek*. When I think back on the old, original *Star Trek*—some of you are too young for that, but I grew up watching the old *Star Trek*.—I didn't realize what I was watching was somebody trying to figure out the changes that were going on in society. One of the characters, Spock, whenever they got into a tight spot would immediately predict "We have a one in a million chance of getting through this particular difficulty." Now, if we just worked on odds, would we ever do anything?

In the midst of all this uncertainty, we try to do our best. We look at the past. We take the information we've got and move ahead. What do we do with it? The temptation, I think, is to try to get it all figured out. The temptation that Jesus had was to show that whatever he did, God would take care of him. Why didn't he go ahead and do it? The devil even gave him scripture as a warrant for what he should do. Jesus turned and said, "That's not the way it should be. Don't test God—the scripture says that as well."

It's interesting, as we think about what scripture asks us to do, it's not to ask God for miracles all the time. The first two commandments are not to ask for a miracle and see that it arrives. You might remember that the greatest two commandments are to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. Or if you think further back, worshiping and caring about God, and caring about one another and how we get along. Don't murder, don't steal, don't bear false witness, don't covet.

As we think about how hard it is to live with the uncertainty of life, I think one of the problems we have with that uncertainty is that we often think about all the bad things that arise out of it. Certainly, there are moments where it really strikes us. We experience something. But on a normal daily basis, I would guess that most of the surprises are just as good as they are bad. In fact, I would guess that life is a lot more interesting because of some of the uncertainty. Perhaps it's a gift that we have a certain amount of unknown that we get to find out. There's a certain spontaneity to life. You could almost say there's a certain life to life because of some of that uncertainty.

Still, we wish at times we could see what was going to happen. While I don't think we will ever completely see, what we have to depend on is our relationships. It feels to me like what Jesus is saying is, "Don't test God; trust God." When we hear this story of Jesus walking across the water, there's this sense in it that it's not just a momentary

experience for the disciples, it's a description for all of us of a God that can walk through the chaos of life – the storms, the wind and the waves – and come to be with us.

When Peter asks if he should come, and Jesus invites him to do that, he's stepping out into the chaos of life. Sometimes in the midst of all that chaos, I'm not sure it was really a good idea to get out of the boat. Peter asked if he should come. Jesus invited him to come after he asked, and Peter showed basic human nature. It's hard to keep that trust strong in the midst of all the chaos. We often need to cry out, "Take my hand!" It's also helpful, I think, to stay in the boat, to be in the relationships that we have and to let God come to us, to look for how God might be appearing. Sometimes we don't see that right away. The disciples thought he was a ghost. We don't necessarily see right away how God is coming to us and we can mistake him. But in the midst of all the wind and the waves and the chaos and uncertainty of our lives, there's a way of remaining open to the God who will come, who will walk right through it. When we meet that God, what does it say happened? Life got calm. Sometimes that calm happens even in the midst of the chaos around us.

So as we live with all this uncertainty, as we think about it going into this time of Lent, the thing I would invite us to do is to open ourselves again. Maybe daily, say a prayer that says something like "God, I'm not always clear whether I should get out of the boat or not. The wind and waves sometimes seem overwhelming, but let me take your hand, let me invite you in and find the way you would lead, let me know your grace. Show me the hope."

I invite you this week not to ignore the chaos, the uncertainty, but to open yourselves to the Christ that walks into our lives through it all. Amen.

Let's pray:

Gracious God, it's become abundantly clear that life is more than a calculation. Help us hear your words to us, inviting us into relationship with you and with one another. I feel like you invite us into a boat that helps us make our way. But most importantly, Lord, let us open ourselves to your work. Help us recognize how you are walking in through the wind and the waves, through the chaos of our lives, through the uncertainty, to become our strength. May we find the calm, the shalom, the peace that you bring. Walk with us through this Lenten season. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.