

In the name of God...AMEN.

Something about me that I want to share this morning is that I grew up in the Seattle, Washington, area until I was a teenager. And the delights of my childhood included summer family camping trips in the mountains of the Pacific Northwest. I have a memory of when I was a little girl, maybe 7 or 8 years old, camping in the Cascade Mountains east of Seattle, on a spectacular river, the Taylor River, chosen by my dad for the great fishing it provided. The Taylor River wasn't very wide, but it was deep and cold and fast, with lots of white water. My father caught the biggest fish of his life the first or second day we were there, in a fight with both the fish and the current, that broke his pole and sent him charging into the river with a net after his catch. He was clearly proud. And because this was back in the days before 'catch and release,' he cleaned and cooked it for our supper, and it was delicious.

A day or two after that, as my sister and I were lounging on the river bank relaxing and not doing much, my mother told us about the natural clay that was embedded in the steep bank itself - so I decided to dig some up and maybe make some pottery or something with it. So as I dug, I leaned over further and further to get the clay, until suddenly I tipped and fell head first into the river, where I was immediately pulled downstream.

I remember being terrified and powerless against the current, and even though I had been learning to swim, there was no chance against this strong, cold water that was maybe chest deep for my little body. My father, who was a few yards downstream fishing, sprang into action, ran down the riverbank, and then he plunged in, and waded over to me and pulled me out. Just like his big fish! I watched him the whole time, and saw his single-minded concentration and determination to get me out of that river.

The whole event couldn't have taken more than a minute, yet it was one of the defining moments of my life. Even in my terror I had never been so utterly trusting and sure of my father's rock-solid, unconditional, self-sacrificing love for me as I was during those moments. The river was strong, but my father was stronger, and I live now to tell about it - these four months after he himself passed from this life to the next at age 88. I live to tell about it with gratitude for his love and his willingness to use the strength and power he had on my behalf.

And that is what I remember as I read this Sunday's gospel lesson, the story of Jesus walking on the water, rescuing his headstrong disciple and friend Peter from drowning, calming the storm, exhibiting a power that awed and astounded his disciples. That day they witnessed a power great enough to save Peter's life, a power great enough to save their lives - and incidentally my life, your life and everyone's lives - a power that is stronger than the forces of nature, the pull of the current, the stormy sea, the force of gravity, even the power of death. Stronger.

Do you have the urge, as I sometimes do, to try to explain this miracle away, as an optical illusion, a trick done with some prop or sleight of hand? Maybe you've seen one of the old movies that has Jesus walking on the water, and it seems likely that the actor is walking on a board. These days of course it is all done with CGI, computer generated imagery. But in this case, as with the other miracles of Jesus, we are just not going to be able to explain it away. The writers of the Gospels want us to understand - not so much the mechanics of how this was done - but that in the ministry and in the very presence of Jesus Christ, something extraordinary and new and spiritually profound is taking place in the world. These accounts are ways of showing that Jesus is not just a great teacher or a powerful prophet or a very good person, but that in Jesus, God has come among human beings to live and dwell. This God is not necessarily bound by the law of physics or nature, though it is clear that God generally does work within those boundaries.

And yet this power by which we are so awed and overcome - this power that is so attractive to the crowds around Jesus, who want to make him a king - proves itself to be something very different than our traditional notions of power. In some ways Jesus' walking on the water and calming the storm really were tricks - ways of getting our attention. Because we usually think of power as something wielded OVER others: the ability to force change, the ability to compel others, the ability if need be to destroy others. We think of coercive power, the power of the strong over the weak. And these days in our democratic republic of the United States, where We the People are invested with the power of assembly, the power of dissent, the power of protest, we have great reason to be concerned - and even outraged - about the coercive power being wielded by the executive branch of the government against ordinary citizens in their cities and states.

The real power of God is something different, of course. We read about it in the Hebrew Bible, in the 1st book of Kings, the story of the prophet Elijah, who ended up running for his life into the wilderness and up the mountain for having spoken truth to the powerful king. There he hid in a cave for the night, and encountered God - and discovered that the power of God was not to be found in violence, in the coercive power of sound and fury: not in the wind, earthquake, or fire, not in the fear of the enemies who wanted Elijah's life. No, Elijah waited for that still small voice of God, "the sound of sheer silence," profound and powerful, through which God guided him during a time of spiritual and political crisis.

St. Paul also knew, in our reading from Romans this morning, that salvation doesn't come from the loud clanging of people proclaiming and imposing their own self-righteous words and works, but through that heartfelt connection with God through the risen Christ, conveyed as he said by "the word that is very near you" - those words of faith shared by people who have experienced the power of Christ in their lives.

And what is that power? It is the power of love in relationship: the power of that mutual recognition that underneath it all, beyond our differences and conflicts we are part of the same whole, you and I. We are the beloved of the one who is our Ground of Being. We are one, and if you are cut, I



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will bleed. It is the power of connection, the power of relationship, the power of God. And this power is totally non-coercive, it can never command me or you to love. It can only invite us into the most profound relationship in the universe. This God, who is SO powerful, tells us, and shows us through Jesus' life, death and resurrection, that this kind of self-sacrificing love is far greater than any direct, coercive power – far greater than any threat of violence or death – in fact, this kind of self-sacrificing love is the greatest power in the universe.

For me, as that little 7 or 8 year-old girl, it was most important to know that the power of my father's love was strong enough to pull me out of those river rapids, the "drink," as it were. And now, as a follower of Jesus' divine promises, it is even more important to know that God's power, a force greater than nature or the violence that humans inflict on one another, it is God's power, the power of non-coercive love, that is meant to transform the powers of this world. We all participate in that love, here in the Christian community of Christ Church, in our various homes and and towns, all across this nation and and all around the world, as members of the Body of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. AMEN.