

Sermon
Sunday, August 13th, 2023
The Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
The Reverend Victoria Scott

**Readings: [GENESIS 37:1-4, 12-28; PSALM 105:1-6, 16-22, 45C; ROMANS 10:5-15;](#)
[MATTHEW 14:22-33](#)**

Unraveled by uncertainty. This is the title of the new hymn – new words, old tune – that we’ve just sung. I came across it online as part of a worship series called “Unraveled: Seeking God When Our Plans Fall Apart” from the team of artists and creatives called “A Sanctified Art” who offer multimedia resources to worshipping communities.

Unraveled. Unraveling can mean many things. It can mean to come undone. To come apart. It can mean to investigate something complicated or puzzling. Other words for unravel: untangle, unsnarl, unwind; elucidate, decipher, reveal, clarify.

The creators at “A Sanctified Art” say that “to unravel is to acknowledge and grieve what has fallen apart to allow God's newness to unfurl.”

So many stories in Scripture are stories of lives that are full of tangles and snarls and knots that seem like an impossible jumble, and then we find that God’s Spirit worked those knots and tangles, worked those lives, into something new.

We find that Jesus's way has brought about an unraveling and a reworking into something new. These stories shape us, and show us the way to our own unraveling...

What *does* it mean to be unraveled? How does unraveling feel? Sometimes unraveling brings relief: a puzzle deciphered. A bond loosened. Other times, unraveling is frightening. It is an undoing that leaves us flapping and flailing in the wind. We need to do the unraveling that is about untangling, unsnarling, unwinding – the unraveling that is about loosening bonds – for ourselves, and for others – on our own, and with others. And, we need to learn to navigate the unraveling that leaves us feeling that we're spiralling into the depths. There is discomfort, and the potential for pain and suffering in both kinds of unraveling. But the good news is that God is with us in all the unraveling in our lives. This morning's Gospel passage reminds us of this and invites us to unravel...

As is often the case with our lectionary, we jump in mid-story in our Gospel passage this morning with "Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat...". What is going on here? What has happened before this "immediately"? It's important to know. This chapter in Matthew begins with the beheading of John the Baptist. Jesus and the disciples receive this news, and Jesus

tries to withdraw in a boat to a deserted place by himself. He is trying to “unravel” here: to acknowledge and grieve what has fallen apart and to allow God’s newness to unfold. And this is not the only time we hear that Jesus chose solitude, that he chose to withdraw by himself to pray. Jesus didn’t get that alone time to unravel the news of his cousin’s death, though. Instead, crowds follow him on foot, and when he gets to shore, he has compassion for them, and he engages with them, healing the sick among them. The disciples try to send the crowds away from that deserted place, but Jesus says no, give them something to eat, and we hear of the feeding of the five thousand. That brings us to this morning’s passage. Jesus sends the disciples on ahead in the boat, and he sends the crowds on their way, fed. Then he goes up the mountain to pray – to have his unraveling time.

Jesus knew he needed that unraveling time, and he knew the disciples needed unraveling time, too. The disciples needed to process the news of the death of John the Baptist. They needed to process the miracle they have just participated in – feeding thousands with five loaves and two fish. Jesus sends them into that unraveling time in that boat. I can imagine them, hunkered down in that boat, talking about all that has happened. I can imagine the feeling of

unwinding and untangling that comes with speaking – sharing with one another – what must have felt like quite tangle of thoughts and feelings!

Note that we don't hear that the disciples were frightened that the boat was being battered by the waves. What frightens them is seeing what they think is a ghost! And this is the part of the story that brings us that other kind of unraveling. Not the untangling elucidating kind, but the unraveling that sends us spiraling into the depths. The hit of adrenaline with news, with an experience that cuts the delicate threads of our life's story and leaves us adrift.

Fear does send us into a particular kind of unraveling, doesn't it? Uncertainty can undo us. The disciples are undone by uncertainty as they think they are seeing a ghost. Peter is undone by uncertainty as he steps out onto that water. He notices the wind and he begins to sink. The other disciples are also undone as they sit, afraid to move.

We all become overwhelmed. We all have tangles that need to be unraveled. Fear and uncertainty do unravel us. God speaks reassurance into all our fear through Jesus. Jesus shows us, reassures us that it's ok to unravel. God is with us in our unraveling.

The last lines of our new hymn this morning:

...Come, Jesus, save us from the depths

and hold our hands secure,

When certainty seems but a dream,

your steadfast love endure....”

Jesus is our eternal reminder that God chose to be with us forever – in the boat, in the storm – and Jesus is our reminder that God is with us, offering a steady, delivering hand in all the unraveling of this life.

Life is full of uncertainty. There are many moments in this life when certainty seems but a dream. But God’s love, made known in Jesus, does endure. The point is not to eliminate the uncertainty, not to reach a place where there are no tangles to be unraveled, where is nothing that undoes us, but to live in a way that allows for unraveling.

Sarah Miles, in her book “Jesus Freak: Feeding, Healing, Raising the Dead” said this:

“Jesus...shows us how to enter into a way of life in which the broken and sick pieces are held in love and given meaning. In which strangers literally touch each other, and in doing so make a community spacious enough for everyone.”

Jesus does show us a way of life in which the broken and sick pieces are held in love and given meaning, *and*, he shows us a way of life that makes room – that is spacious enough – for unraveling.

This place – this community of Ascension – is a place that makes room for unraveling. This is a place where we can be reminded that just as Jesus sought solitude to unravel, we need to do the same. Jesus didn't stay in a place of solitude though – he didn't do all his unraveling alone with God – he returned to be with the disciples, and we are called into this same way of life. We are called to make space in our lives for unraveling alone with God, and we are called unraveling here, together. We listen to Scripture that shows us ways of unraveling. Our song and prayer and sacraments hold us, surrounding and supporting us in our unraveling. This is a safe place where we can find and offer one another a tangible reminder of God's presence, and a steady hand in the midst of unraveling that leaves us spiraling into the depths. This is a place where we can feel more powerfully that God is weaving something new into our unraveling.

Jesus spoke reassurance into the disciples' fear as he walked toward them on the water. He said "Take heart. It is I – or better translated, I AM – be not

afraid. This reminds me of Padraig O'Tuama's "Prayer for Courage" and I'll share it with you now:

Courage comes from the heart
and we are always welcomed by God,
the heart of all being.
We bear witness to our faith,
knowing that we are called
to live lives of courage,
love and reconciliation
in the ordinary and extraordinary
moments of each day.
We bear witness, too, to our failures
and our complicity in the fractures of our world.
May we be courageous today.
May we learn today
May we love today.

Courage comes from the heart, and Jesus invites to courageous unraveling in this life. We don't need to be afraid of unraveling. My prayer today, and every day is that we may all find ways to unravel the tangles that are holding us back from fullest living. I pray that we will feel God's presence with us when we are faced with unraveling that leaves us spiraling and adrift. May we unravel today, and every day, trusting that God is always weaving something new. In Jesus name. Amen.