

Sermon – 6/24/18
“The Spirit Brings...Peace”
Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32; Mark 4:35-41
4th Sunday after Pentecost
Davidson College Presbyterian Church – Davidson, NC
Scott Kenefake, Interim Pastor

Sir Paul McCartney is now 76 years old and is one of the most successful composers and performers of all time. In 1997, he was knighted by Queen Elizabeth for services to music. McCartney is also one of the wealthiest musicians in the world, with an estimated net worth of US \$1.2 billion.

One of my favorite McCartney songs is, “*Let It Be.*”

McCartney said he had the idea of “*Let It Be*” after he had a *dream* about his mother during the tense period surrounding the sessions for *The Beatles* (“White Album”) in 1968. According to McCartney, the song's reference to “*Mother Mary*” was not biblical. The phrase has at times been used as a reference to the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ.

Nevertheless, McCartney explained that his mother – who died of cancer when he was fourteen – was the inspiration for the “Mother Mary” lyric. He later said: “*It was great to visit with her again. I felt very blessed to have that dream. So that got me writing ‘Let It Be.’*” He also said in a later interview about the dream that his mother had told him, “*It will be all right, just let it be.*” When asked if the song referred to the Virgin Mary, McCartney has typically answered the question by assuring his fans that they can interpret the song however they like.¹

He explained it recently on James Corden’s, *Carpool Karaoke*, --one of the best things I’ve seen on TV recently:

“*It will be all right, just let it be.*” Do you believe that?

You will likely not be surprised that, for the first time in ten years, the American Psychological Association (APA) — the largest scientific and professional organization representing psychology in the United States — found that Americans' overall stress level increased over the past eighteen months due to concerns about *current events*.

Tension over *current events* can be particularly intense in the *workplace*, where Americans with starkly different views and attitudes have to make an effort to get along while trying to make a living, another APA study showed.

Therapists have also noted the rising level of anxiety, spurred in part by the unprecedented accessibility of information, with smartphone alerts of political and international crises erupting in the palms of their hands, whether they’re ready for them or not. Just twenty years ago, most people would have to wait to be close to a television screen or a newspaper to find reason to worry.

Lodro Rinzler, the founder of MNDFL (short for “Mindful”) meditation centers in New York, said he has seen a big spike in attendance in *meditation classes* that focus on navigating rapid fire emotions.²

Related to this, for *The Hallmark Channel* ratings are booming! Hallmark was the only non-news channel in the top 15 to see substantial viewership growth last year. It's feel-good TV. There's no sex or gore. “*We are a place you can go and feel good,*” says Bill Abbott, chief executive of Crown Media.

¹ Paul McCartney, *Let It Be* (Song), Wikipedia

² “*Stress of Trump Era Harms Americans Psychological Health,*” TRT World, May 11, 2017

That's a polite way of saying more and more Americans are turning to the Hallmark Channel for *relief* from the daily news cycle. Turn on the news and you see people who can't get along, even in the same party. Turn on Hallmark and everyone ends the show smiling.

"We intentionally branded ourselves as the happy place," Abbott says. Hallmark's tagline is "*the heart of TV.*"³

Escapism at its best! Yoga, Pilates, and gym memberships are also up as people try to reduce their stress-levels and create some sense of balance in their lives.

Which brings us to our Gospel reading this morning from the fourth chapter of Mark—a parable where Jesus says, "*Peace, be still!*" as he calms a raging storm on the Sea of Galilee at night as he and his terrified disciples travel from one side of the lake to the other in a rickety wooden boat, being tossed to and fro by the waves.

To understand this story, we need to understand what the people in Mark's church were facing.

You see, the *current events* they were facing were difficult and stressful, as well, because in the year 66 (AD), the Jewish people in Jerusalem and surrounding areas began a revolt against the Romans which led to a multi-year siege of the city in which the Romans breeched and penetrated one wall after another, until in the year 70 (AD) the Second Temple was destroyed, and the Romans brutally extinguished the final remnants of the Jewish rebellion.

This led to a *diaspora* –a *dispersion* of the surviving Jewish people from Judea into parts of Northern Africa, Europe, and the Middle East and planted the seeds for what would become rabbinic Judaism. And this also included Jews who believed that Jesus was the Messiah and some of these were the Jewish Christians that the writer of the Gospel of Mark was writing his Gospel for.

So, when we understand that they were likely *refugees* fleeing the destruction of their homeland, the metaphors in our story of Jesus calming the storm in the midst of the chaos and tumult of the storm with the words, "*Peace, be still!*" they take on an even more poignant and significant meaning.

The people of *the Way* as they were then called, had found "peace" in this Jesus—even in the midst of incredibly challenging circumstances. They experienced this peace (spiritually and emotionally) through their intuitive sense of Jesus's ongoing presence with them and with their community. The implication, then, is that *we* can, too.

You know, this past Wednesday was *World Refugee Day*. The dramatic surge over the past half-decade of families and children fleeing Central America, is actually part of an unprecedented *worldwide migration phenomenon* that has overwhelmed international support systems and scrambled global politics.

Last week, the United Nations Refugee Agency released an annual report that cited a record-high 68.5 million displaced people, including 25 million refugees, pouring out of places as far-flung as Syria, Myanmar, Congo and Venezuela. Analysts cited war, economic hardship, unstable governments and climate change to suggest the

³ "*The Feel-Good Hallmark Channel is Booming in the Age of Trump,*" The Chicago Tribune, June 23, 2018

unprecedented displacement is the new normal and bound to get worse — with no clear international road map over how to address the phenomenon.

Growing anti-immigrant sentiment in Europe and the United States has led countries to pursue hardline policies and offer less support to refugee programs operated by the United Nations. Given those political constraints, analysts suggested, the uncontrolled movement of desperate populations has become a much bigger problem than what can be solved by a U.S. president. “The institutions, internationally and nationally, are wholly unequipped to deal with the challenge,” said Robert Muggah, co-founder of the Igarapé Institute, a Brazil-based think tank.⁴

Large-scale Central American migration is not a new phenomenon. Civil wars, political instability, and economic hardship first drove significant numbers of Central Americans northward in the 1980s, when the population from that region living in the United States more than tripled. Despite the end of political conflicts in the early 1990s, additional migration was driven by family unification, natural disasters, and persistent political and economic volatility, with many individuals entering illegally.

The region continues to suffer from poor political and socioeconomic conditions, including some of the world’s highest homicide rates and widespread gang violence, which drive ongoing migration.⁵

In fact, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador are the world’s deadliest countries outside war zones.

And before we are tempted to blame the parents of the children who have ended up in detention centers in this country, we need to remember that things were so bad in their countries of origin that they left on foot with what they could carry, scrounged for food in dumpsters, road for endless miles on broken-down trains through Mexico, braved the threat of rape, physical violence, and theft constantly, simply for the chance for them and their children to *live*. And we have treated them like criminals instead of asylum seekers—which is what the vast majority of them are.

But regardless of your personal policy preferences with regard immigration, Pope Francis has stated clearly, and succinctly the universal Christian with regard to refugees that should inform our approach to this complex, global issue. He said:

“A person’s dignity does not depend on them being a citizen, a migrant, or a refugee. Saving the life of someone fleeing war and poverty is an act of humanity.”

That’s where we—as followers of Jesus—start our understanding of this issue while we also recall that the one we call *Lord was a refugee, as well—he and his family fled to Egypt to escape the wrath of Herod. (Matt. 2:13).*

And so, the refugee crisis is a *global crisis*—not just an American crisis—and it’s likely to get worse before it gets better. We have to ask ourselves: What kind of world do we want our children and grandchildren to live in? Walled in? Fenced in? Shut off from the rest of the world? Fearful of the “other?”

Or a world that recognizes the dignity of all people? That champions human rights and marshals the resources to maintain the integrity of national borders, process the requests of refugees and asylum seekers, shares with other countries in the resettlement of refugee families, and protects against those with criminal backgrounds.

Suffice it to say that separating children from their parents at the border and locking them up *indefinitely* will not solve the problem, nor will locking up the families together *indefinitely* solve the problem). All it does is further traumatize people who are already thoroughly traumatized—and in the case of children—scar them for life.

⁴ “Beyond Trump’s separation of migrant families lies a real border crisis that is proving bigger than the presidency,” David Nakamura, June 23, 2018

⁵ *Central American Immigrants in the United States, SPOTLIGHT*, APRIL 5, 2017, Gabriel Lesser and Jeanne Batalova

Some final thoughts: *the U.S. Census Bureau's* release of race and age statistics for 2017 points to two noteworthy milestones about the nation's increasingly aging white and growing diverse population. First, for the first time since the Census Bureau has released these annual statistics, they show an absolute decline in the nation's white non-Hispanic population—accelerating a phenomenon that was not projected to occur until the next decade.

Second, the new numbers show that for the first time there are more children who are minorities than who are white, at every age from zero to nine. This means we are on the cusp of seeing the first minority white generation, born in 2007 and later, which perhaps we can dub Generation “Z-Plus.”

Together these new data suggest that a signature feature of U.S. demographic change in the 21st century is the aging and decline of the white population, along with population growth among young minorities to counterbalance the trend.⁶

Friends, we've already seen where fear and demagoguery and xenophobia want to lead us. And the world some are trying to hang on to no longer exists—if it ever did.

I think we'd do much better to just “*Let it be,*” as Paul McCartney put it, to listen to the words of Jesus, “*Peace, be still!*” In the midst of the storms of life—whatever they might be, and to heed the words of Pope Francis in recognizing the dignity of all people—no exceptions. That is the way of peace. That is the path toward a hop-filled future. Amen.

⁶ *US white population declines and Generation “Z-Plus” is minority white, census shows*
William H. Frey, June 22, 2018