

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania, VA
To be delivered on August 13, 2017	On the occasion of the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 14A

Matthew 14:22-33

Stepping Out

Last Sunday at the late service I did a children’s sermon. It was the Feast of the Transfiguration. So I had the kids act out the story of the Transfiguration with me. I played Jesus, because I had the right wardrobe for it. We had Peter, James, and John—all played by kids—Moses and Elijah. We even had someone play the cloud that overshadowed them on the mountain top. There was only one more kid, and conveniently one more part to play. I had Brady play the voice of God. I gave him his line, “This is my Son, my chosen. Listen to him.” And I asked him to say it in God’s voice. Brady took a deep breath and said, “This is my Son, my chosen. Listen to him.”

I jokingly said, “That was the still, small voice of God.”

If we had been producing a Hollywood movie about the story, I’m sure that the voice would have been a loud, booming voice coming from the cloud. And there is Biblical precedent for that. God speaks to Job out of the whirlwind in what I’m sure was a booming voice. But other times God speaks in a whisper. After Elijah was told to go out into the open on the mountain top so that Lord could pass by, there was a great wind that cracked the rocks, but God was not in the wind. There was an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake. Finally there was a fire, but God was not in the fire. Then there was what the King James Version called the “still, small voice,” and the NRSV translates, “the sound of sheer silence.” That was God.

Brady made us lean in and listen carefully if we wanted to hear what he said. That’s exactly what God does. We have to lean in if we want to hear God’s voice.

In case there is anyone who missed the announcement: I will be leaving Christ Church at the end of September after nearly 17 years. In fact, October 1 will be my last Sunday. I will be going to be the rector of St. Andrew's in State College, Pennsylvania, my home parish in my home town. This call was not the result of a wide search for a new position on my part. The position was open. I was interested in the parish. So I put my name in, and here we are. The side benefit is being close to my mother who lives in State College, and who is now alone since my father died in March.

I mention this in my sermon, for one thing, to make sure everyone has heard the news, but also to make a point, and it goes back to that still, small voice. When I came here to Christ Church I believed that God had called me here, and that I came to do a job. Now, I never heard a booming voice saying, "Jeff, go to Spotsylvania, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me." But I did engage in my own process of prayerful discernment as I learned about this parish and this place. Just as the vestry engaged in their own process of prayerful discernment. We all ended up at the same conclusion. Seventeen years later, I can say that I truly believe God did call me to Christ Church.

I say this having just concluded another process of prayerful discernment. This time I believe that God is calling me, and my family, to St. Andrew's.

Now this means that you as a parish will be entering into your own process of prayerful discernment. I know you didn't ask for this, but this can be a very powerful and positive time for a parish. You have excellent leadership. This can be a fruitful time. It is a time to lean in and listen to God. How has God worked through the ministry of Christ Church in the past? Where is God calling Christ Church now? What kind of person do you want in your next rector? These are the kinds of questions you will be asked to pray about. In order to answer these questions

you will need to do some prayerful listening. You will listen to each other. You will listen to the advice and guidance given you by the diocese. Most of all, you must listen for that voice that can be hard to hear. That voice that is so easily drowned out by the noise around us, the noise in our own minds. Listen for that voice amongst all the voices.

In our Gospel reading this morning, Peter was willing to step out of the boat, to attempt to walk on the sea, just as Jesus was doing. He asked Jesus to command it, and he did. So Peter took those frightening steps. He believed that Jesus would make it okay. The wind was battering their boat, but Peter stepped out and found footing on the waves that threatened to sink them. He was doing fine, until his faith failed him. Fear started to drag him down, but Jesus reached out and saved him. “You of little faith,” Jesus said to Peter, “why did you doubt?”

Those words must have stung Peter. He had the faith to step out. It just got too scary. Doubt is a normal human reaction when things get rough. We like certainty. We like stability. The time is coming soon when we will all be stepping out of the boat. My family and I will go to a new home and start over in a new parish. You will call a new rector. Big changes can be frightening. During times of change we can lose our regular landmarks and can feel adrift. It is exactly at times like that when we must trust in God to bring us safely to where we need to be. In fact, it is during times like that when we find we have nothing else we can count on.

I am going to miss you all terribly... but this is not a goodbye sermon. This is a sermon to tell you that if you keep your faith where it belongs, in Jesus Christ, and if you intentionally lean in to hear that silent voice that speaks words of encouragement, and guidance, and truth, you will be just fine. You will be just fine.

Amen.