I want us to consider faith for the next few minutes. I don’t mean faith as a set of beliefs or faith as a creed. I mean faith as trust in God. When a person has faith, that person trusts that God has given his Son Jesus Christ for their sins and for everyone’s sins. No one can prove that Jesus was resurrected. We take it on faith. No one can prove that Jesus’ death on the cross brought about the forgiveness of sins and that his resurrection ushered in the prospects of eternal life. You and I trust that God has done these things for us.

So again, I’m not using the word “faith” this morning to refer to a statement of belief or as something we say. I’m using the word “faith” to refer to all the things we do which come as a result of our trust in God.

We need deep trust in God for the death and resurrection of Jesus to become reality for us. We also need deep trust in God to make it through the bigger challenges of life. Stormy times, difficult, taxing times, come to all of us. That’s part of being human. And then we Christians often experience other pain and suffering because we are followers of Christ. For example, we disciples of Jesus find that we are ostracized by some people because we follow Christ and not the crowd. Disciples of Jesus sometimes suffer financially on account of our dedication to Christ and because we don’t put worldly success at the top of our priority list. And of course, there are places around the globe where it is downright courageous act to speak or act as a follower of Jesus.

So whether the difficult times in our lives (the storms) are caused simply of the human condition or caused by our discipleship, you and I find ourselves facing immense storms. And this is serious stuff! We are talking about trusting God when the diagnosis is grim. We are talking about continuing to trust God when we enter
a financial crisis or when a loved one died tragically at an early age. We are talking about inner calmness when everyone else is crazy with fear. We are talking about remaining committed to Christ when it would be much easier to follow the crowd. We are talking this morning about faith when it really counts.

But first, we had a couple of storms come through town yesterday afternoon. They reminded me of a story. One summer evening during a violent thunderstorm a mother was tucking her small boy into bed. He was of that age when certain events feel like the world is coming to an end – for example, a thunderstorm. His mommy was about to turn off the light when he asked with fear in his voice, "Mommy, will you sleep with me tonight?" His mother smiled and gave him a reassuring hug. "I can't dear," she said. "I have to sleep in daddy's room." The boy didn’t say anything for a while. Then he said: "The big sissy."

And here’s another story about faith – or a lack of faith: Once a man was hiking alone in the mountains when he slipped and nearly fell off the mountain. He managed to save himself by grabbing hold of a small tree which grew out of the side of the mountain. The man yelled out, “Help! Is there anybody out there?” A voice called out, “I am the Lord your God, and I will help you if you only do as I say.” “O, yes, Lord.” He was so relieved. So he asked, “What must I do?” God replied, “You must have faith. Let go of the tree.” There was a long pause and then the man asked, “Is there anyone else out there?”

Now, let’s go to our two Bible stories. The story of Jonah, the storm and the big fish and the story of Jesus and that big storm have several things in common. First, they are the real deal – life-threatening events. In both stories death by drowning seems imminent for everyone on board. Also, in both stories the main character (Jonah and Jesus) is asleep and oblivious to the wind and rain and huge waves. In both stories the frightened people on board awaken the main character and ask him to do something to save them.

The sailors out on the Mediterranean Sea tell Jonah that he should pray to his god just as they are praying to their gods. The twelve disciples on the Sea of Galilee awaken Jesus with hope that he will do something to help them. I can feel the urgency and fear in their words….something like “Wake up and do something – anything!” They have seen him cast out demons, cure the sick and lame and perform many other wondrous works for people in need. This time it is they themselves who are in need, and they are in hope that he will respond on this occasion with miraculous power to help them.
Now please pardon the pun, but I want us to go deeper into both stories. The sailors throw Jonah into the raging sea. They didn’t want to, but he has told them that the storm had come on them because he had disobeyed God. If they would sacrifice him (which they did by throwing him overboard) then the storm would subside (and so it did.) You and I are well aware that Jesus sacrificed himself for us on the cross. He died that we his people might live eternal life here and now and eventually into eternity.

Something else the two stories have in common: the main character stays three days in the grave. Jonah is saved by a great fish which is commanded by God to swallow him. After three days the fish obeys God again and spits him out. And, of course, Jesus spent three days in a true grave because he was truly dead.

Another thing: both of our stories of storms show the human condition alongside the immense power of God. Jonah is a prophet of the Old Testament, but he is not a faithful and courageous prophet like the other prophets of the Old Testament. You see, Jonah is told by the Lord to go preach to people in the East, but he rebels against God and goes west. His agenda is not God’s agenda. On the Sea of Galilee Jesus shouts at the storm and makes it subside. The lake’s surface becomes calm. This is divinity. This is a powerful action of God performed for the sake of his disciples who are in danger. We should let this great story remind us of the enormous power and compassion which God possesses to save the world. So the disciples have God in the boat with them, just as you and I do at all times.

But let’s don’t forget the human side of Jesus. It’s right there in the same story. Jesus was born of a woman, brought up in a village. He needs to eat, which we hear about quite often in the gospels. And he needs to sleep! So where is this powerful Son of God when the storm hits? He is in the back of the boat… asleep…. with his head on a cushion! Let’s don’t ever forget that God came in human form. God took on flesh; and that powerfully, wonderfully demonstrates the compassion of our maker. In Jesus God took on human form.

Jonah, the not-so-good prophet, learns a valuable lesson from the storm and the fish that saved him. He learns that God is determined that he preach to the pagan people in the East so that they might be saved from judgement. God is going to get his way! That’s a lesson which comes to Jonah in a very painful and frightening way.

Out there on the Sea of Galilee, the disciples of Jesus get a valuable lesson about the power of God to work through life’s calamities and save his people. Oh,
what a lesson they learned that day! Oh, what a lesson we can learn this day if we will listen. It tells us that sickness and injury, terminal illness, pain and grief and loss are not the final word in this world of ours. They might seem to have the last word; and other people might have fallen into hopelessness and despair. But you and I are blessed to know that God is with us through it all. God provides. God restores. God reclaims our weary souls and lifts us up!

On the 17th of last month something happened which could have wrecked the lives of the family members and friends of the nine people who were slaughtered by a racist. His horrible deeds that night against the very people who welcomed him into their church could have wrecked that congregation. That congregation could have easily become controlled by fear for years to come. They could have shut up the doors of their church to everyone except familiar people. Or if you think about it, they could have gone into a rage and sought revenge. They could have easily drawn others into their rage and set off even more distrust and hatred and bloodshed between the races. Put it another way: The “storm” on the 17th of June in Charleston could have wrecked relations between groups of people in this country and even wrecked our relationships with God.

But look at what God has done! People have come together. We are united in sorrow when we could have split apart in rage. We have chosen unity. We have chosen reconciliation. God can do marvelous things – even in the midst of tragedy. God can bring light where there was darkness. This state has presented a marvelous example to the rest of the nation. Look at what God has done over the past few weeks!

So God can even work through the storms of life. God can be trusted to work through the storms of life! (Remember, friends, that faith is trust.)

Several United Methodist college students are doing mission work this summer on John’s Island, just south of Charleston. Our conference has been sending young adult missioners there for at least forty years. One of those students working on John’s Island has grown up in a strong church home. I knew his mother and father years ago, and actually met this young man and his twin brother when they were about three weeks old.1

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1 I am referring here to one of the twin sons of Ms. Susan Kovas. Rev. Ken Kovas, their father, tragically died only days after the boys were born.
A few weeks ago, only four days after the shootings, that young man doing mission work on John’s Island, decided to drive into Charleston. He wanted to worship with the congregation at Emanuel AME Church. He did not know that eventually the sanctuary would be crowded full of visitors including members of the state legislature, other county and state officials and even the governor and her family. But remarkably, this young man got there so early that he just walked in. What impresses me the most is not that he got in ahead of a large crowd. It is that he was warmly greeted by the congregation. They made him feel right at home, helping him to a seat, giving him a bulletin, and all of this despite the great sorrow and shock which you know they were experiencing.

Let’s remember that a few days earlier other members of that same congregation had welcomed another stranger into their Bible study – a young white man. We know what that young white man did. But four days later, on Sunday morning, they graciously welcomed another stranger – a young white man. Love can conquer all evil. God is powerful. God can take the worst of circumstances – the worst of life’s storms – and turn them into good.

Someone once said that “Faith is the bird that sings while it is yet dark.” We have this hope, this faith, in a powerful, world-changing God. With faith we can sing while the world around us is as dark and frightening as it can be. Martin Luther, Jr. trusted God – trusted God enough to keep working for a changed nation while he received death threat after death threat. King once said that “Faith is taking the first step, even when you don’t see the whole staircase.”

Let’s ask God for that same kind of faith, that same kind of trust. Let’s prayerfully ask God to fill us with faith where we most need to be filled with faith. Some of us know we are faltering in our faith. We can be encouraged to know that Jesus’ disciples also faltered in their faith. Once he put the storm in its place, Jesus asked his disciples “Why are you frightened? Don’t you have faith yet?” (CEB) I suppose all of us here could use more faith….more trust in God.

I don’t know the poet’s name, but I find this little poem to be profound:

**Deep calls to deep.**
Beneath the stormy rapids of my days, there is God.
Beneath the waves of demands and expectations, there is God.
Beneath the surface of distractions of daily life, there is God.
A consistent wellspring.
A nourishing river.
God is always there and here, hidden in our depths, full of promise.

I’ll close now with some words by the Swiss theologian Karl Barth. Someone asked him if he would state what Christianity is all about in just a few simple words. He replied: “It can all be summed up in the simple words of the child’s hymn: ‘Jesus loves me! This I know, For the Bible tells me so; Little ones to him belong; They are weak, but he is strong.’”

Let us pray:

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These are my notes for the PowerPoint slides which I presented before I began the sermon.

As I have said before the Sea of Galilee is a special place, a beautiful place. Centuries ago, Jewish rabbis said of the Sea of Galilee: “Although God has created seven seas, yet He has chosen this one as His special delight.”

- 13 miles long
- 8 miles wide at its widest point
- Shoreline totals 33 miles
- Lowest freshwater lake on the planet – 700 feet below sea level
- Along with the Jordan River, it is the primary source of water for the State of Israel.
- Relatively shallow at no more than 200 feet
- Because it is not deep, the surface is more prone to have tall waves in stormy weather.

Along the lake is semi-tropical. This is largely because it is so far below sea level. But the hills and mountains around the lake rise to as much as 2,000 feet above sea level, meaning that the air there is usually cool and dry. When the two air masses are distinctly different the dry, cooler mountain air can clash with the humid air along the lake.
The lake is relatively shallow. This makes for sudden and violent storms on the lake which can catch people on boats by surprise and create very real danger for them.

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Jonah 1, The Message

One day long ago, GOD’s Word came to Jonah, Amittai’s son: “Up on your feet and on your way to the big city of Nineveh! Preach to them. They’re in a bad way and I can’t ignore it any longer.”

3 But Jonah got up and went the other direction to Tarshish, running away from GOD. He went down to the port of Joppa and found a ship headed for Tarshish. He paid the fare and went on board, joining those going to Tarshish—as far away from GOD as he could get.

4-6 But GOD sent a huge storm at sea, the waves towering. The ship was about to break into pieces. The sailors were terrified. They called out in desperation to their gods. They threw everything they were carrying overboard to lighten the ship. Meanwhile, Jonah had gone down into the hold of the ship to take a nap. He was sound asleep. The captain came to him and said, “What’s this? Sleeping! Get up! Pray to your god! Maybe your god will see we’re in trouble and rescue us.”

7 Then the sailors said to one another, “Let’s get to the bottom of this. Let’s draw straws to identify the culprit on this ship who’s responsible for this disaster.”

So they drew straws. Jonah got the short straw.

8 Then they grilled him: “Confess. Why this disaster? What is your work? Where do you come from? What country? What family?”

9 He told them, “I’m a Hebrew. I worship GOD, the God of heaven who made sea and land.”
At that, the men were frightened, really frightened, and said, “What on earth have you done!” As Jonah talked, the sailors realized that he was running away from GOD.

They said to him, “What are we going to do with you—to get rid of this storm?” By this time the sea was wild, totally out of control.

Jonah said, “Throw me overboard, into the sea. Then the storm will stop. It’s all my fault. I’m the cause of the storm. Get rid of me and you’ll get rid of the storm.”

But no. The men tried rowing back to shore. They made no headway. The storm only got worse and worse, wild and raging.

Then they prayed to GOD, “O GOD! Don’t let us drown because of this man’s life, and don’t blame us for his death. You are GOD. Do what you think is best.”

They took Jonah and threw him overboard. Immediately the sea was quieted down.

The sailors were impressed, no longer terrified by the sea, but in awe of GOD. They worshiped GOD, offered a sacrifice, and made vows.

Then GOD assigned a huge fish to swallow Jonah. Jonah was in the fish’s belly three days and nights.

Mark 4: 35 – 41, The Message

Late that day he said to them, “Let’s go across to the other side.” They took him in the boat as he was. Other boats came along. A huge storm came up. Waves poured into the boat, threatening to sink it. And Jesus was in the stern, head on a pillow, sleeping! They roused him, saying, “Teacher, is it nothing to you that we’re going down?”

Awake now, he told the wind to pipe down and said to the sea, “Quiet! Settle down!” The wind ran out of breath; the sea became smooth as glass. Jesus reprimanded the disciples: “Why are you such cowards? Don’t you have any faith at all?”

They were in absolute awe, staggered. “Who is this, anyway?” they asked. “Wind and sea at his beck and call!”