The Rev. James Richardson
Interim Dean
Proper 7 – June 24, 2018
Mark 4:35-41
“Peace. Be Still”

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Thank you for bringing us home.
From the bottom of our hearts, Lori and I thank you for your welcome back to Trinity Cathedral. We are filled with joy and gratitude to be back here among you after so many years away.

Thank you.
For those who don’t know me, I am Jim Richardson, and for the next year or so I will be your interim dean.
Lori and I were here for many years, first as lay people – we both served on the Vestry at different times – and then after I was ordained, I was on the staff as a priest.

Some of you I’ve known for many years, but I might have gotten a little vague about your name. So please don’t be offended if I ask you to remind me.

Some of you are new to me. Please introduce yourself; let’s find the time for a cup of coffee in the months ahead.

And, everyone, please wear your name tag, and please be patient with me as I learn, and relearn your names. I want to know everyone. I want to hear your story.

For the past 12 years, after leaving Trinity Cathedral, I’ve felt a little like Bilboa Baggins in the J.R.R. Tolkien novel, “The Hobbit.”

The subtitle to the book is “There and Back Again.”
We have definitely been “there” and at times we wondered if we would ever be back again.

In these past dozen years we’ve experienced many adventures, many joys, and – candidly – we’ve endured many difficult trials.

There were times I felt like one of the disciples sitting in the boat as the wind comes up, and the seas get rough and wondering if I would make it.

I can see myself looking back at Jesus, snoozing blissfully in the back of the boat, and wondering when he will wake up.

Somehow Jesus he always does.
It was especially on the rough seas when I learned what it means – truly means – to be the Church, and what it means to live by faith, prayer and discernment of the will of Christ Jesus.

In the months ahead, I hope to share some of this with you, and I hope to learn anew from you what it means to be the Church in this place. Please teach me.

For most of our time away, I was the rector of St. Paul’s Memorial Church in Charlottesville, Virginia, which is definitely “there.”

You probably saw Charlottesville in the new last summer when Nazis and white supremacists marched through the streets. They were marching with torches in front of my former church.

St. Paul’s is located across the street from the University of Virginia. Most of our parishioners were connected to the university.

We especially enjoyed a large and vibrant student ministry. Our students filled our parish with their energy and creativity and broadened our horizons. Our students also did not hesitate to challenge us when it felt to them we were too set in our ways.

It was with our students that we endured our greatest trial.

Soon after the fall term began in 2014, a student who lived in a sorority on our block and was close to many of our students, went missing. Her name was Hannah Graham.

A few days later Hannah was found murdered, her body discarded in the woods.

Because of our location across from the university, our church became the locus for students and the wider community to gather in their grief and anger, to pray and to cry.

We kept the doors open to the sanctuary, and the lights on, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, for six months. Students, staff and faculty came at all hours, day and night.

We learned together what it truly means to be church. And I learned what it truly means to say, “God is with us.”

We experienced much else in our time away; many marriages, many baptisms and many life milestone celebrations.

After a year of parish dialogue, we held the first same-sex wedding in a church building of any mainline Christian denomination in Central Virginia. And we did so with the sanction of our bishop – and that alone was a milestone in Virginia.

It felt like the entire community came to witness the vows of Deborah and Margaret.
Three years ago, Bishop Barry Beisner invited us to come home to Northern California. I was called as the priest-in-charge at the Church of the Incarnation in Santa Rosa.

Last fall, as you know, wildfires raged out of control in the North Bay for two weeks.

Eleven of our families lost their homes, and at least half of the congregation evacuated. We kept the church doors open, 24 hours a day, until we had to evacuate the church itself.

I learned once again what it means to be the church in a storm. I learned once again how the church is a place of refuge, a place of faith and prayer, and a place of courage. I learned once again what it means to say, “God is with us.”

In our time together as your interim dean, I hope we will explore what it means to be the church in this time and place. I hope we will explore what it means to know – truly know – God is with us.

And I hope we go further and prayerfully ask, what special responsibilities we have as the Episcopal cathedral in the capital of the most powerful and populous state in the nation? This is no small question.

This cathedral is more than a building, more than a venue that hosts diocesan events, more than even the bishop’s flagship church, as important as all that is.

How and when do we use our prophetic voice to proclaim the Gospel as a cathedral, particularly in times like these when we are not all of one mind?

How do we respond to this crisis of migrants being separated from their parents? How do we respond to the crisis of homelessness on our streets all around us and, really, everywhere in our state?

To answer these questions, it matters how we view ourselves as the Church.

In fact, I would suggest that how we view ourselves as the Church has everything to do with how we view God.

For much of our church history, we have viewed God as hovering above us in the clouds, as a detached father figure occasionally tossing thunderbolts at us when we mess up. We become little tiny creatures dodging lightning strikes in this epic cosmic drama.

That way of seeing God renders Jesus into something of an assistant God, bailing us out of trouble; and that way of seeing God renders the Holy Spirit into the cleanup guy who tidies up after all the messes God-the-Father and his assistant, Jesus, leave behind.

But there is another way of understanding God that is deeply in our tradition. This way of viewing God has everything to do with how we view ourselves as the Church.

To grasp this way of understanding, you need look no further than this table.
It is no accident that the central locus of our worship is the sharing of a sacred meal at this table.

It is no accident that Jesus tells us he is especially with us when we come together around this table.

Jesus beckons us to see ourselves deeply connected to the Divine and each other in this meal.

There is no seating chart at Jesus’s table. No rank. No privilege. Everyone matters. Everyone is important. Everyone is connected. Everyone has a role, each according to our gifts.

Everyone is invited.

Imagine what we could be like if we took this seriously? Imagine what we could be like if we really understood the Church, and ourselves, this way? Imagine what the world would be like?

If we view the church and ourselves as the people of the table, I would submit that we must also view God and Christ and the Holy Spirit this way, too.

Our God is not hovering above us, but is here with us, at this table.

As we share this sacred meal, we remember how God came to us as a human being, Jesus, experiencing life with us as we experience it, and going to hell itself to heal us of all that wounds us and hurts us.

And we remember that Jesus is deep within us, and in each other, through the Holy Spirit.

Jesus welcomes us to this table, bids us to linger awhile, and then walks ahead of us, beckoning us to follow into the future.

Will we go?

I would submit that is the most important question facing each of us in this cathedral congregation.

Will we go with Jesus where leads?

Will we open our minds and hearts to new possibilities, new challenges, new people?

Or will we be too set in our ways, too comfortable in our human certainties, too closed up in our silos?

Will we be too afraid to let our faith guide us, too afraid to discern together the mind of Christ?

“Why are you afraid?” Jesus tells the disciples in a boat, in the middle of a storm. “Have you still no faith?”

We live in troubled times, we all know this. The storms rage all around us. There will be other storms ahead for each of us, both personally and in our larger world.

Our boat can feel very small and the waves around us very large. But know Jesus is with us – each and every one of us.
“Peace, be still!” Jesus commands the heavy seas.
Peace, be still, he commands us.
Peace be still.
Our God gives us everything we need to do everything we are beckoned to do. Everything.
Peace, be still, and look around you.
This cathedral is brimming with love, talent, generosity and grace.
Everything we need is right here. We lack nothing.
Trust in the Spirit and trust in each other. Be kind, be gentle, be patient with each other. Pause and listen for the nudges Holy Spirit.
And know that Jesus is leading us out of the storms even now. Peace, be still.
May you know you are loved, may you have strength and courage, and may God bless each and every one of us today and always.
AMEN