

Preacher's Note: In the summer of 2019, I accepted a call to a senior pastor position at a church in Atlantic Beach, Florida, a small, coastal suburb of Jacksonville, about an hour south of the Georgia border. It was my home state. It was my home presbytery. Yet, as the first woman to be called to the position of senior pastor in this church, and the only black person ever to serve in a pastoral role, at this nearly entirely white church, my arrival in the community was met with suspicion, anger, and open hostility that threatened to end the call to ministry before it began.

In 2020, in the midst of the global pandemic, in a season of racial violence and racial uprising, one year to the day after the contentious vote to approve my call to the pulpit in this church, my office in the church was broken into and vandalized. My door was kicked in. My furniture was smashed. My personal items were destroyed. There was no damage or sign of forced entry to any other part of the building or grounds. Nothing was stolen or taken. Only my office. Only my door. Only my space. Only my peace. The official statement from the church concluded that it was a robbery attempt. No one was identified or charged with any crime.

I preached this sermon in worship on the Sunday morning after the break-in.

A Safe Place

Genesis 32:22-31

Mark 4:35-41

Melanie Marsh
Miami, Florida

“The spiritual freedom we seek cannot be found by grasping at, retreating to, or protecting our perceived safe spaces. Our freedom lies in remaining open continuously, not only to Life’s changes but also to the Divine Light within us and others.”

– Peter Santos

“Once upon a time, there was a quiet little village in the French countryside, whose people believed in tranquillité—tranquility. If you lived in this village, you understood what was expected of you. You knew your place in the scheme of things. And if you happened to forget, someone would help remind you. If you saw something you weren’t supposed to see, you learned to look the other way. If by chance your hopes had been disappointed, you learned never to ask for more. So, through good times and bad, famine and feast, the villagers held fast to their comfortable traditions.”

-Joanne Harris, *Chocolat* (2000, Penguin Books)

So begins the story of the villagers of Lansquenet, a fictional town in the French countryside, whose world was forever altered by their tumultuous, transformative relationship with unusual newcomer, Vianne Rocher, in Joanne Harris's novel, *Chocolat*.

Vianne and her young daughter arrived in the village on a winter day.

On that same day, a strong and unsettling wind from the North began to blow.

In the Caribbean, where my family is from, we have a name for this kind of unsettling wind. It is called *La Tramontana*—the wind that changes everything.

Many of us have made The Beaches community our home, and made Community Presbyterian our church because to us, living in this place, feels like “just another day in paradise” every day. We appreciate the tranquility, the beauty, the sanctuary that this community offers us. This is a place that feels safe.

For a long time, maybe for our whole lives, things have made sense to us in this place. We've been comforted, reassured, encouraged, and maybe we've grown to believe that this is a community where we won't have to encounter many of the ugly, unsightly, or uncomfortable things that go on in the world “over there, across the ditch” on the other side of that sparkling Intracoastal Waterway.

Yet, in recent days and weeks, we have come to realize in shocking ways that, even here, we are not immune to the storms and suffering of the world.

Even in this place, brutality can break in.

Even in this place, our hearts, our lives, and our peace can be shattered.

The unspeakable brokenness of this world is making itself known to us, and it does not care what zip code we live in, how pretty our view is, how nice we are to each other.

These are mighty times. A Tramontana wind is blowing. It feels like a storm.

It is changing our entire world—erasing our places of safety and sanctuary.

And it is terrifying.

When Jesus said to them, “Let us go across to the other side,” the disciples had no idea what was in store for them. But then, like so much of their experience with Jesus, this moment in the boat was about encountering the unknown, the unimaginable, the unthinkable. Here we see Christ teaching them how to break free of the human bonds of fear, the illusion of control, and the sedative of comfort. The storm may have been all around them in the story, but we can be sure that there were other storms raging under the surface of this story. It is there, under the surface, where the greatest lesson lives for us in this story.

It may not be something we want to acknowledge or admit, but sometimes the unsettling storm lives within us. Sometimes the storms are *created by us*. We may not even realize what is happening until something, or someone, pushes us out into uncharted waters, and the tranquil surface of our lives is troubled. Then, like the

disciples, we may be tempted to panic or escape or push away the thing we see as a threat to our tranquility.

Still, Jesus urges us to stay present within the storm. “Do not be afraid,” Christ says to us, “Have Faith.” When everything inside us wants to panic, to rage, or to lash out in fear, Jesus shows us in word and deed that whatever storms may rage within us or around us, they are nothing compared to the power of the love of God. They are nothing compared to the peace that the presence of God can instill in us. What’s more, when winds begin to blow our lives into places we don’t recognize, that don’t feel at all comfortable, if we can breathe deep and still the disquiet within us, we may find that the Spirit is actually moving us toward new horizons, to places that will help us to grow and to transform, through the disquieting storm.

When Vianne Rocher arrived in the village of Lansquenet, she was met with curiosity, suspicion, even open hostility from many of her neighbors. They believed if they could just stop her, avoid her, or make her go away, their *tranquillité* would return.

But that is not what happened.

In the end, Vienne did not leave the little village in the French countryside. And their tranquility did not return. She did, however, eventually do something her neighbors never expected. She won them over. Vienne Rocher changed everything in their lives with her relentless hospitality. She handed it out to any and every person who walked through her door. She had an uncanny ability to disarm them with the delicious creations that came from her kitchen—her love poured out in chocolate.

It feels like it was not an accident that it was around her table that the people of this tranquil village began to see that the very things they feared could—if they let them—make them strong, and vibrant, and resilient.

The same is true for us.

The world right now feels unrecognizable. We cannot make sense of it.

Waves of uncertainty are coming at us fast and they are not stopping.

The Holy Spirit is moving through our safe places like the wind of the Tramontana, changing *everything*.

As we move into the fall, we begin an exploration of our church name and our mission. We will ask ourselves, “What does ‘Community’ mean to me?”

Right now, that might feel like a difficult question to answer.

Maybe the meaning is changing like so many other things around us these days. As we sit here this morning, and in the weeks to come, we may feel like Jacob, wrestling with God, as we try to reconcile all that we see and feel around us. We may feel like the disciples in the boat, overwhelmed and grasping for any sign of safety.

The Good News of these Mighty Times is that like Jesus, there with the disciples in the boat, God’s love is already right here. Within us. All around us. Between us when we are near to one another, and when we are far apart.

It can be easy to miss in the chaos, but it's here.
In our quiet moments, we can feel it being poured into our hearts.
Maybe today, our simple call is to move toward that love.
Maybe today, we meet one another here and care for those who are in pain.
Maybe today, we welcome those who are desperate or different or alone.
Maybe today, God's love will pour into us,
Maybe we can all start again and again, and again,
Recognized for who we are
Known at our deepest level
Loved no matter what else might be true about us.
When we feel like there is no safe place,
God invites us to meet one another around the table.
Here God says to us,
"When you are
Broken
Angry
Hating yourself
Hating others
When you feel the world shifting around you
When you feel abandoned or afraid
I will be your home.
I will make you whole."
Amen.