“Windswept." A sermon based on 1 Kings 19 :1-15a, Galatians 3:23-29 and Matthew 14:22-32 delivered on June 22, 2025 at the First Congregational UCC of Onekama, Michigan by the Rev. Alison Andrea Young.

The High Plains are the beginning of the desert West, and although they are most often thought about as beginning in the Dakotas, they actually begin in Northwestern Minnesota. A colleague of mine, when I served churches in Minnesota and South Dakota, commented to me one day that she had to leave the churches that she served in that area (near Fargo/Moorhead on the Minnesota side) because “the wind wore her out."

I didn't understand what she was talking about until I traveled to that area, to Crookston, for a Women in Rural Ministry Conference at a Catholic Retreat Center there. The wind there was relentless. It blew and blew against you as you walked. And even on so called “light wind" days the feeling that you could not get away from it was daunting. People who live there all their lives get used to it--they say--but it really wore me out! I could well understand my friends comment after that experience/

Elijah must have felt somewhat the same way when he stepped from the cave where he had been hiding into a whirlwind, and the disciples must have also felt that same lack of control-unable to help themselves-or to escape-when they found themselves struggling against the wind in their little boat and being battered by the waves as they “went it alone" out on the sea trying to make the other

Side, while Jesus prayed on the mountain. They felt windswept, both Elijah and Jesus' disciples. They must have felt totally disoriented and overwhelmed.

In her book Dakota: A Spiritual Geography, author Kathleen Norris, not only compares the two experiences of wind and land to being on the sea, but describes the emotional dynamic that these experiences can elicit in comparing her experience of Hawaii and of the plains of North Dakota, all experienced in

one short months’ time, in the following excerpt:

Encircled. The sea that stretched out before me in Maili, on the Waianae coast of Oahu, as this month began, has been transformed into the plains of North Dakota. I am riding a Greyhound bus to the small town where I’ll be teaching writing to schoolchildren for the next two weeks. Snow in the fields has crusted over; wind-lines, restless as waves, flash like the ocean in sunlight.  
“Never turn your back on the sea,” is Hawaii’s wisdom. “Or the sky,” we Plains folk might add. Like sailors, we learn to read cloud banks coming from the west. We watch for sundogs and count rings around the moon.  
I have turned with the circle: away from gentle air and birdsong, the Waianae Range unfolding like a fan in mist, toward a wind gritty with spent soil burning my tongue, a freezing rain that stings my hands and face.

Whether or not we have experienced the vulnerable feelings described here in the face of unremitting wind, and the natural starkness of the plains, Norris' descriptions evoke in us memories of times that we felt lost, abandoned by our God, or so we thought, and literally “windswept." Like Elijah facing the

whirlwind, and the disciples facing the sea wind, we all have been, at times, swept into depression in times of grief, and loss, and even in times of plenty, when life seems overwhelming: when that deadline is looming on the horizon at work, when

there are more bills than monthly paycheck, when our children are trying our patience, when we just need some rest and sleep, and yet another task is presenting itself. And maybe most of all, we feel this way when we are dealing with difficult issues within our families.

Throughout our "windswept" times of confusion we, like the disciples and like Elijah before them, long for respite, for calm, for the wind to stop. In short, we long for serenity—for "the thin whisper" of God which Elijah finally experienced

in the silence which followed the wind; and which the disciples experienced in that moment-on the fourth watch of the night—when Jesus came to them across the water and comforted them by saying “Take Courage, it is I. Do not be afraid."

Perhaps, the best example of this type of serenity-this type of calm which comes after the whirlwind-- comes when a family which is dealing with a member who is suffering from an addiction--finally is able to “Let Go" and can recite the

Serenity Prayer and mean it! This famous prayer, several examples of which we have displayed in art pieces in our parlor, was originally written as a much longer prayer by theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr:

"God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;  
 courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the

difference.”

For it is through this courageous surrender, through this letting go of the struggle that family members, as well as the person who is addicted, can begin to move toward health--can experience the calm that only truth telling can give.

If Kathleen Norris could not accept the truth of the landscape in which she lives, she could not write so beautifully about it and what it teaches her about divinity, she writes:

THE HIGH PLAINS, the beginning of the desert West, often act as a crucible for those who inhabit them. Like Jacob’s angel, the region requires that you wrestle with it before it bestows a blessing. This can mean driving through a snowstorm on icy roads, wondering whether you’ll have to pull over and spend the night in your car, only to emerge under tag ends of clouds into a clear sky blazing with stars. Suddenly you know what you’re seeing: the earth has turned to face the center of the galaxy, and many more stars are visible than the ones we usually see on our wing of the spiral.

Or a vivid double rainbow marches to the east, following the wild summer storm that nearly blew you off the road. The storm sky is gunmetal gray, but to the west the sky is peach streaked with crimson. The land and sky of the West often fill what Thoreau termed our “need to witness our limits transgressed.” Nature, in Dakota, can indeed be an experience of the holy.

Like Kathleen Norris, we all need the space to live and breath—we need divine space--holy space. And, like Elijah and the disciples before us, often we seek it by hiding away in a cave, or by wanting a miracle to happen, like Peter’s wanting to walk on water, but the truth is--the truth is that in order to get that space, we cannot hide forever. As God tells Elijah, “Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. " --Go return and do what I have set before you to do. . . .” We also cannot cower in fear like Jesus reminds the disciples, “Take Courage, it is I. Do not be afraid."

We must face the truth, stop long enough to “hear it" to name it and claim it, and do what we need to do to deal with it. Even though it feels like it sometimes, we are not alone. We live in community. We have places to which we can reach out to get help, to seek counsel, to find another person who is willing to help share the burden. If the truth is that we have wronged someone, we can move to right that wrong with support from others—and then move on in the assurance of the

serenity that we are not doing it alone.

“Then there came a voice to him that said, ‘What are you doing here Elijah?’” and then after all of Elijah’s excuses, the voice said “Go back the way you came”." When the disciples were terrified in their little boat they looked up and they “saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. “It’s a ghost,” they said, and cried out in fear. But Jesus immediately said to them: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.” The beauty of the Serenity Prayer is that it captures the courage and the wisdom needed to face life’s whirlwind experiences. So, let’s say it one more time to remind us of that beautiful fact:

“God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;   
 courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the

difference.”

Amen and Amen.

And, just to be perfectly clear, yes, this whole sermon is preaching to myself!

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