

Sermon Preached June 21, 2015
Year B, Proper 7
St. John's Episcopal Church
Beverly Farms, Massachusetts
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Bradbury

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

5-year old Johnny was in the kitchen as his mother made supper. She asked him to go into the pantry and get her a can of tomato soup, but he didn't want to go in alone. "It's dark in there and I'm scared." She asked again, and he persisted. Finally she said, "It's OK--Jesus will be in there with you." Johnny walked hesitantly to the door and slowly opened it. He peeked inside, saw it was dark, and started to leave when all of a sudden, an idea came, and he said: "Jesus, if you're in there, would you hand me that can of tomato soup?"¹

Fear is a very real emotion, and one not confined to childhood. Our Gospel reading addresses fear. After a long day of teaching, Jesus

¹ Charles Allen, Victory in the Valleys, <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/f/fear.htm>, June 19, 2009

and his disciples decide to cross the Sea of Galilee. Jesus is tired so lays down on a cushion in the boat and falls asleep. Suddenly a huge windstorm comes up and begins to swamp the boat. The disciples are very afraid. They think the boat will sink and they will drown. In their fear they frantically wake Jesus up and cry, “don’t you care that we are about to die?!” So immediately Jesus rebukes the wind, and says to sea, “Peace, be still.” And then there is dead calm and the storm is over. The disciples are saved.

As you know each of the four gospel books, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, tells the life of Jesus, each a little differently from the other. Some tell some stories, some tell others. But what is interesting is that the story of Jesus calming the winds and sea is one of the few stories that is told in ALL FOUR gospels. What we know is that if a story is mentioned in all four gospels, it means something particularly important is trying to be communicated.

The setting of the story opens with Jesus teaching by the Sea. He is sitting on a boat because of the large crowds nearly crushing him,

eager to hear his teachings. All day he tells parables about the Kingdom of God to the people. At the end of the day he and his disciples leave by boat, and then we get the storm story. When they finally get to the other side of the Sea they are met by a man who is possessed by many demons, and Jesus does an exorcism. Then he heals a sick woman and brings a dead girl to life. In other words there are three things happening: 1) there are teachings, 2) there is the storm, and 3) then there are conflicts with demons, illness and death. There are words, followed by actions, and in the middle is the storm. The storm story is a hinge. To the ancient Israelites the sea is often a metaphor for evil. Jesus calming the sea means he has power over evil, that he can control cosmic forces.

If you read the story closely you see that the disciples still are fearful after Jesus calms the winds, only it isn't the storm they fear, it is Jesus himself. Jesus didn't end their fear, merely changed it.

What story do you think Israelites would have in mind if they encounter a man able to control the winds and the sea? When was the

last time a man did that? Moses. Moses and the parting of the Red Sea. Today's lesson closes with Jesus saying to them, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?' And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?' Who indeed. Throughout the gospel of Mark, no one knows who Jesus is. And now he starts acting like Moses and he controls the sea as though cosmic forces were at his beck and call. Sure, the disciples were afraid of the storm, but WOW, now they've got someone with cosmic powers sitting in their boat with them! Someone as mighty as Moses! Their fear and awe has shifted. Because this fear has much larger implications than simply a few fisherman in a storm.

The storm is the part of the narrative that breaks open the minds of the disciples to consider that Jesus is not simply a prophet, but someone of cosmic capabilities. And this is scary.

Jesus isn't just a warm fuzzy buddy, who will make me feel good. He is powerful in ways we cannot begin to fathom.

It's like the fear the disciples felt on Good Friday, when they feared their master would die vs. the fear they had on Easter, when they discovered he had risen from the dead. The first was scary, but resurrection took fear to a whole new level!² This meant the predictable laws of nature were altered. In other words, God can "rock our boat" as well. He isn't simply gentle Jesus meek and mild, he is Jesus the All-Powerful and we are his people. He's not simply a kindly cousin we turn to when we have a skinned knee, he is the Cosmic Christ who calls us to new life. This is scary, but it is also wonderful. Because we know from the stories today that God may be awesome, but She can be trusted.

After the horrific, racist murders at Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston on Wednesday this week, there was a powerful witness to the gospel when the families of the victims came before Dylann Roof, the gunman, on Friday. They articulated to him directly the deep hurt

² Sarah Jackson Shelton, http://day1.org/1326-the_sleeping_jesus

and pain they were suffering at the death of their loved ones, suffering that he had caused. Yet immediately afterwards, with quivering voices, they unequivocally proclaimed their love for and forgiveness of Dylann.

“Alana Simmons, granddaughter of victim Daniel Simmons Sr., 74, said, ‘Although my grandfather and the other victims died at the hands of hate, this is proof, everyone’s plea for your soul is proof, that they lived and loved and their legacies will live and love. So hate won’t win and I just want to thank the court for making sure that hate doesn’t win.’”³

In a culture that is often strident in its demand for retributive justice and revenge, their words were a proclamation that the Kingdom of God is already arriving, that God is present with us in this tragedy and working out the healing of the world. God is here.

³ <http://abcnews.go.com/US/dylann-roof-hears-victims-families-speak-1st-court/story?id=31896001>

“Ubi Caritas” is a statement and song from the early church. Part of the words are:

Where charity and love are, God is there.

Christ’s love has gathered us into one.

Let us rejoice and be pleased in Him.

Let us fear, and let us love the living God.

And may we love each other with a sincere heart.

Yesterday morning I listened to an interview with the Rev. Stephen Singleton, who is the former pastor of Emmanuel AME Church. He was asked to reflect on how this forgiveness was possible. He quoted the Romans passage I reflected on last week that said “Nothing can separate us from the love of God.” He noted that the families “lived that yesterday.” He pointed out that for these families, even a murderer is not separate from God’s love. [Murders] “may be agents for hate, but they cannot

overpower the ambassadors for love.”⁴ That these families choose not to live in a world of hate and fear, but rather are actively living under the Reign of God. As Paul said, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” [Rom 12:21]. When we hear this statement in the abstract, it seems unrealistic. But with the example of these families, we can see it is already happening. This is the new life to which we are being called. Do not fear! The Kingdom is already on the move.

Being a Christian doesn't mean we won't have storms in life. It doesn't mean that God will magically fix all our problems. But it does mean that we don't have to control the storms. We don't have to be afraid. God is in our boat with us, which is both frightening and wonderful.

Even when Jesus seems to be asleep at the helm, when our dark night of the soul overwhelms us and we don't think God is paying attention, God **is** with us. You will be given the strength and love to prevail. The

⁴ <http://www.msnbc.com/up-with-steve-kornacki>

end result may not be what we ask for or imagine, but evil will be overcome. Over and over again the message of scripture is “do not be afraid.” God is in charge. The Almighty is watching over you in love. The world can be scary, but you are not alone. God may be frightening and unknowable, but God can be trusted. Amen.