

SERMON
June 21, 2015
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Nothing like a thunderstorm to shake things up a bit—to wake us up. Lightning, rain, wind. My smart phone woke me up last night with a horrible warning sound—a weather advisory alert. “Take Cover” it urged. There was a tornado watch. “Take cover. Go inside immediately.” I was thankful that I had a place to “go inside.” Thunderstorms remind us that we are not so tough after all. That we are all vulnerable. That we are all in this together. Thunderstorms occur throughout the world where there are conditions of high humidity and temperature along with atmospheric instability. Storms occur when high levels of condensation form in a volume of unstable air that generates deep, rapid, upward motion in the atmosphere. The heat energy creates powerful rising air currents that swirl upwards. Cool descending air currents produce strong down draughts below the storm. After the storm has spent its energy, the rising currents die away and down draughts break up the cloud.

Here we are on June 21st— the longest day of daylight in the year. It’s Father’s Day. It’s summer. School is out. But the nation is once again, caught in a terrible storm of violence and grief and fear and continuing social unrest. It’s a strange thought—the perpetrator of this recent hatred and death (Dyllan Storm Roof) has the middle name— “Storm.” And the people he sought to hurt—they are those who are “in the boat with Jesus.” We’ll come back to that.

In today’s Gospel — Jesus and his disciples are crossing the Sea of Galilee. Without a trip to Palestine, the Sea of Galilee probably sounds as if being out there in a boat is something like crossing the Atlantic in a tall ship—L’ Hermione, no less. It’s not. It’s more like being in a small boat on the Severn River, or a piece of the Chesapeake Bay—and the warning of a storm is like hearing there is a “small craft advisory.” Best not to go out at all. Unless, of course, that’s

how you make your living. The disciples weren't recreational boatmen, they were Eastern Shore men — watermen. Storms were part of their experience, part of what they learned to expect. This story, and their fear, reminds us, that there is no getting use to a storm. When a storm comes up—we all remember just how small we are, just how vulnerable, just how real the threat of death is. Everyone jumps when lightning strikes.

As this story begins, the disciples are moving from the Jewish side of Galilee, to the Gentile side, from the side where they are at home to the side where they are strangers. From the side where life is familiar to the side where it is new, different, and unfamiliar. From the side where life is relatively safe to the side where it is not. The storm that came upon them, came quickly. It must have been a squall or a gale—a sudden onset of wind—16 knots or greater. You may never have seen or crossed the Sea of Galilee but we've all been in that boat. This is not just a story about the weather and a boat. It is a story about life. It's a story about faith. It's a story about fear. Wherever you find one of those you will find all three. Life. Faith. Fear. They cannot be separated. Sometimes the sea of life is rough. The wind is strong. The waves are high. The boat takes on water and might even sink. Each of us has a storm story to tell.

I'm reminded of a quote, attributed to Plato, but probably not: "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a battle you know nothing about." Everyone is facing a storm you know nothing about. As a back drop for this gospel lesson, we might say, "Be aware, be kind, listen well—everyone you meet is experiencing a storm you know nothing about." Our common condition includes the storms. Some of experiences begin with a phone call, news we did not want to hear, choices we have made, mistakes, difficult relationships, hopes and plans that fell apart, difficulty growing up and finding the right way. Some storms seem to arise out of nowhere and

take us by surprise. Other storms build and brew as we watch. There are personal storms and storms that effect the community, society, a whole nation. There are storms of loss and sorrow. Storms of suffering. Storms of confusion. Storms of failure. Storms of loneliness. Storms of disappointment and regret. Storms of depression. Storms of uncertainty and second guessing, Storms of injustice. Regardless of when or how they arise storms are about changing conditions — heat energy, rising currents, down draughts. And sometimes, lightning. Order gives way to chaos. The water is deep and the shore, the safe harbor, is on the distant horizon.

The disciples are quick to make the storm about Jesus. “Do you not care that we are perishing?” “Do something. Fix it. Make it better.” They accuse Jesus of being absent, passive, uncaring.

How can he sleep at a time like this? “Sleeping Jesus,” however, is in the same boat and in the same storm as the disciples. He is surrounded by the same water, blown by the same wind, beaten by the same waves. His response, however, is different. And perhaps that is what this lesson is all about. The disciples fret and worry. The disciples want busyness and activity.

In this story, in this lesson—It appears that the greater storm and the real threat is not the wind, waves, and water—the outer circumstances of their situation, but the greater threat lies within them—and with their little community in the boat—the community Jesus is teaching to become a saving community for the world. Jesus teaches them that the more threatening storm is the one that churns and rages within us. It is the interior storm that blows us off course, beats against our faith, and threatens to drown us. Fear, vulnerability, and powerlessness blow within us. The sense of abandonment, the unknown, judgment and criticism of ourselves and others, hopelessness, yes, hopelessness are the waves that pound us. Resorting to anger, isolation, cynicism, or denial or hatred is no shelter from the storm.

I remember being present in a community that had experienced the drowning of a teenager—a death that might have been prevented by a series of different decisions and behaviors. Friends, families, the community had gathered. The pain was intense throughout. A facilitator was brought to the gathering. “Please, sit down. Everyone be silent. Be still. Be still.” “Peace! Be still!” said Jesus to the storm, or was it to the disciples? Jesus isn’t changing the weather as much as he is changing the disciples. Or both. He speaks to the wind and the waves within them. Afraid of what is going on outside them, Jesus speaks to what is going on inside. “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” Less about the circumstances, more about us. We will not not eliminate all the storms of our lives, but we will learn how to move through them.

Here’s the real catch. Faith, and courage for that matter, are not some unattached response, not some willy-nilly wishful thinking—but faith is about a relationship. Faith is about trusting a relationship—trusting a friendship, a loyalty, a promise. Like David, picking up five smooth stones, convinced that if he trusts in God, he will be able to face the giant Philistine who threatens to kill him. Faith is what allows us to be still, to be peaceful, to be calm instead of anxious, to move forward.... Like a child trusting a parent, believing that someone is watching out, someone cares, someone is there to protect us—a child climbs into the bed of his parent, and falls fast asleep as the storm rages outside. Faith is believing that the love of God is stronger than any wave that beats against us. The love of God is deeper than any water that threatens to drown us. The love of God is mightier than the winds of any storm. That because of the love of God, we will be able to face the challenges and succeed. Without faith there can be no hope. Faith is the assurance that Jesus is present “in the boat” with us—and that his faith shows us what our faith might be. Jesus’ response to the circumstances of life is always the same, “Peace! Be still!”

Though we may not understand, faith means trusting in God who created us, loves us and keeps us. That is what we saw at Emmanuel Church in South Carolina this week. Not the storm, that passes, but the faith. Practiced faith. Relatives of the nine people shot down during a Bible study session inside their historic black church confronted their storm. They described their pain and anger, but they also spoke of love. “I forgive you, my family forgives you.” “We would like you to take this opportunity to repent.” “Do that and you’ll be better off than you are right now.” “As we said in Bible Study, we enjoyed you but may God have mercy on you.” “A hateful person came into this community with some crazy idea he’d be able to divide, but all he did was unite us and make us love each other even more.” They forgave him. They advised him to repent for his sins and asked God’s mercy on his soul. Living faith. Practiced faith. Living faith is more powerful than any storm.

In the past week we have seen and heard the real voice of Jesus—not hidden away on the pages of a book, the Bible, but effective and life-changing love in the hearts and souls of his community of faith. In this culture of violence and hatred, we have almost learned to expect guns and terror. But it was the steadfast faith of the people, the practiced faith of the people, that will endure and ultimately, in the hands of God, will change their city and change this nation and change the world. Faith alive! From the very beginning, God spoke to his people— “Peace, be still and know that I am God. There will be no other.”