

Year B
Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost
Psalm 46
Mark 4:35-41

Psalm 46
God's Defence of His City and People

To the leader. Of the Korahites. According to Alamo. A Song.

¹ God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.

² Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;

³ though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

Selah

⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.

⁵ God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.

⁶ The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.

⁷ The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Selah

⁸ Come, behold the works of the Lord;
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.

⁹ He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.

¹⁰ 'Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth.'

¹¹ The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Selah

Mark 4:35-41

Jesus Stills a Storm

35 On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, ‘Let us go across to the other side.’³⁶ And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him.³⁷ A great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped.³⁸ But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, ‘Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?’³⁹ He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, ‘Peace! Be still!’ Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm.⁴⁰ He said to them, ‘Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?’⁴¹ 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?’

Lessons from the Storm

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable and lovely in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

After the storm, the impetus is to say, “Thank God, we are safe,” if we are. To look downriver and say, “Dear Lord, help those who are in the floodwaters,” that is, if we are on dry land. To look to the sky and wonder at the moon. To post the party pictures that show, yes, we are alive, but even on the verge of catastrophe, it is all ok. It is good to celebrate life. So good, in fact, that we might in fact dance in the streets with thanksgiving—perhaps when the power returns!

But if we are honest, there is a part of our souls that still might be hoarding water and power. That takes each bowl of soup with gratitude after losing weeks’ worth of food to spoilage. That might still be exhausted at that encounter with the edge of the swirling chaos. That might wonder that we did not drown, still aware of the swirling waters just miles away choked with sewage and the rotting carcasses of industrial farming. Conscious of how precarious the privilege we live with really is. That there really is no “us” and “them.”

I speak of uncomfortable things.

But I felt this urgency when I was a chaplain in homelessness ministries preaching in the great city cathedrals—to remind folks that there is no “us” and them.” That it is only our access to resources, and nay, literally the higher ground, that buys us comfort in hard times.

Which is why many of us feel a need to help—to give of that bounty—and I pray you find a way, even if it’s contributing just a small share or volunteering down at the Coaliton, the Northern Moore Family Resource Center, the food bank.

I had to convince many of my clients at the shelter *not* to give of their resources to their brothers and sisters on the streets until they were more secure themselves. Funny—so much easier to give when the spectres of death and scarcity are every day appearances.

I realized this week that I know better how to be a minister—a chaplain really-- in chaos and crisis than I do to be in this calm and peaceful place, where the coffee and scones place across

the street could be an oasis in the midst of the storm. But I am learning. And how wonderful a life, a community, that these peaceful, beautiful things are accessible! It just means that we have more to give, does it not? (Well, if you are among those for whom these things are accessible.)

But what of the storm itself? That whirling vortex, that slow-moving, low pressure voluminous cloud of wet, pouring itself over our lands, bearing down slowly in intermittent howls of wind and rain? What came to you in the dark? Or the shut-tight?

Those twenty-some-odd of us who gathered in the sanctuary last week to share lessons of the storm acknowledged helplessness, loneliness, and thanksgiving for those who come to aid.

And this storm brought up memories of storms past. Chris and Katherine remembered a harrowing rescue at sea. I went racing down to Charleston with the spectre of Hurricane Hugo on shadowing me, a similarly dangerous storm at Florence's outset that took a last minute turn and left us for two weeks without potable water or power. (And when I say "us," I mean the relatively privileged upper and upper middle class. Let's be real. There were poor, black rural areas that went two to three months without power.) We react differently based on our experiences. During Hugo I remember huddling in a hallway with wind that sounded like a "freight train," in the words of my mother—or to me, a screaming screeching that came in gusts as if the walls were porous, turning the sliding glass doors to semi-liquid, men madly nailing two by fours in the pelting rain to secure the undulations to the sound of urgent directions over a HAM radio. And in the closet behind me, my sister slept through it all.

No surprise that my reaction to this storm was to race down to Charleston to secure her safety; meanwhile she, blasé, poo-pooed the storm and its strength until the last minute, when it turned out she was right, mostly by chance, the storm already weakened and having dumped so much of its moisture on us up here already.

But that's the danger with each storm that we put at arm's length, not addressing, pretending like it doesn't exist, until the real one comes, isn't it? Or is it?

Psalm 46 tells us:

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.¹

We are meant to take refuge in the Holy, no matter the storm outside—the storms of life or the storms of climate change.

Or how's Jesus:

¹ Psalm 46:1-3

A great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, ‘Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?’ He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, ‘Peace! Be still!’ Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, ‘Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?’²

I smile to think of this—I slept better in this howling storm than I have in months. I think of my sister asleep on a pile of coats in a closet in a category 4 storm. Was she not more Christ-like than those of us who huddled in fear like those disciples? Who can sleep through a storm?

Only those who trust in God; who trust in those who care for them, that they will be borne to safety. I worried. I drove. I made sure she had a plan. And then I prayed like crazy about this place, this community, and found that if I searched my soul-if I listened to God- I found that my place was indeed here with you, where I am called to serve. I made a decision to come back and weather the storm with you that at that point looked like I was driving into the heart of the storm. Because you folks mostly were sheltering in place. What was I doing outside of the storm, away from you, if my sister had the peace to sleep through another storm?

So I came back. I made sure you knew that for those who needed it, and I truly thought that it would just be me—I would have a service of some kind if I could at all help it. I checked on you and tried to make sure you had the resources to be well. I hunkered down. I prayed. I watched the rain and wind. Because what else is there to do? I can’t save each and every one of you. Nor do you need it. No. The best I could do was pray and sleep. And hope you were doing the same—enjoying the reprieve that the cancellation of the Installation allowed.

As I slept between waves of rain, I prayed. There was almost never any cell service, and the internet was mostly out. I could not contact you but for phone, or occasionally get on facebook or email to read and see that people were mostly ok. The air grew more thick and dense inside. Outside was refreshingly green and pouring, the air bending the trees up high. I was reminded of my days in Hawai‘i in single-wall houses, the jalousie windows’ slats almost always open to the wind and light rain, but even when closed, allow the wind small entry to make the curtains move. The houses breathe, and you along with them, the wind and breath of life that will not leave you be—nor do you want it to. These days we live so much more cut off from God, which Wendell Berry remembers in his poem, “How to Be A Poet (to remind myself):

*Breathe with unconditional breath
the unconditioned air.
Shun electric wire.
Communicate slowly. Live
a three-dimensioned life;
stay away from screens.
Stay away from anything
that obscures the place it is in.*

² Mark 4:37-40

*There are no unsacred places;
there are only sacred places
and desecrated places.*³

The beauty of a hurricane is not in its suffering and devastation. I will not teach that God intends suffering and punishment. I believe in a God who accompanies us through the storm. Nor is there beauty in the resultingly, increasingly erratic storms because of climate change and what we are doing to Creation. No, the beauty comes in the experience of the raw power of creation, and that same force that can create can destroy. That the storm humbles us and reminds us who is God. And after the destruction: the beauty unfolds in the ways we quit our tents and help one another. Remembering that what matters so much isn't what the politics of our neighbors are, but **how** they are.

After Hugo, everyone's freezers were thawing out. It was Charleston, so that meant there were marlin and mahi steaks and venison to be used up. The families up and down the street that didn't have trees through their roofs took turns hosting parties, cooking up the food on camp stoves and with propane grills. After we finished cleaning our yards, we went down and helped those who were still working. Chainsaws became part of the collective ownership between neighbors. The smell of pine sawdust permeated the air. I learned to wash clothes in buckets, my mother taking secret pleasure that her kids would not be as helpless as she thought us to be; she who had outhouses growing up and lived on a subsistence farm. Her knowledge was all of a sudden valuable, and she had a chance to pass it on. It took a long time for the water to stop tasting of pine pitch. We used to joke that we never ate so well as after the hurricane. This was a sheltered life, and so these were my lessons: this is how we help. We pitch in when and how we can.

I heard a woman interviewed on NPR the other day whose home wasn't recovered yet from Matthew when Florence came hurtling in slowly. They lost everything to Hurricane Matthew's flooding and were still rebuilding. They just lost everything again. She said that her 13 year old daughter starts shaking and hides when it rains. They've been there, just down the road in NC, for generations, but she said it's time to leave. They can't do this anymore. We have had climate refugees for years from small island nations like Tuvalu, and now we're have them from the coasts and along the floodplains of the Carolinas and Southeast. These families will remember the storm very differently. Because again: there is no "us and them." Just access to resources. And access to the higher ground. And access to social capital that determines when the power trucks come. We have to remember that power is not just the electricity that flows through our walls, but what we have to help change systematic injustice that would perpetuate the plight of the marginalized. Whether we're cooking meals or seeking better lives for our children, we are **always** better together. We can be reminded that we do, indeed, people, have the power!

So how do we live in that place between the God who sleeps through the storm—who calls us to stillness and out of our screen-filled lives—and the God who is present through our suffering—

³ Wendell Berry, "How to Be a Poet (to Remind Myself)," in *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry* (Washington, D.C.; Plymouth: Counterpoint, 1999), accessed September 23, 2018, <https://onbeing.org/blog/how-to-be-a-poet-to-remind-myself-wendell-berry/>.

and the God who calls us to justice? We recognize all of these facets of the face of God, and find our place in the mix.

God is our refuge—our “shelter from the stormy blast.” In the Psalm and Gospel readings today we are told:

“Be still, and know that I am God!”⁴

“Jesus woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, ‘Peace! Be still!’”⁵

I invite you to stillness. I invite you rest and relax into God’s arms. To develop a faith that allows you to sleep through storms so that you are ready to act when God calls you to action. I invite you to listen, in the breath of the wind, for the way God is calling you to walk when you get to the other side. May you be borne safely, whatever storms you are facing, and may you truly know the peace of God that passes all understanding.

Amen.

⁴ Psalm 46:10

⁵ Mark 4:39