

Proper 7B – June 21, 2015
1 Samuel 17:1a, 4-11, 19-23, 32-49; Psalm 9:9-20; 2 Corinthians 6:1-13; Mark 4:35-41
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

Christ our Still-Point: “Be not afraid”

The horrific violence unleashed upon the faithful members of “Mother” Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina several days ago has rocked not only the people of Charleston, but all of us as well. Let us seek some guidance in today’s gospel, where Jesus’ disciples find themselves on the Sea of Galilee in a boat being tossed about by a sudden life-threatening squall. The Sea of Galilee is a fairly large inland lake with low ground on one side and high ground on the other. That’s a formula for unpredictable winds. The winds can come up, the sea can become suddenly unstable. And that’s what happens in this story. Jesus is asleep in the boat, resting from his recent encounters with large crowds. The terrified disciples panic. They wake Jesus up, screaming, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” Jesus tells the sea to be still, and they make it home alive. With a word Jesus commands the wind and the waves, while at the same time exhorting his disciples to have more faith. This is not just a pleasant little story to reassure the timid. Rather, it is a gospel message for all of us who, finding ourselves in a stormy situation, think with alarm that Jesus seems to be asleep.ⁱ

As a former colleague, Bill Tully, put it, Mark, telling this story in his gospel, expects that we will get some of what’s going on as we remember other sea stories or images, like the story of Job, in which Job is addressed by God who says: Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?ⁱⁱ Where were you when I put boundaries on the sea so that it wouldn’t flood you? This gospel story also evokes, with a little bit of playfulness, the image of Jonah, the reluctant prophet who tried to escape his assignment by sea and who was sleeping below deck while a storm raged and had to be awakened by the frightened crew. And it even takes us all the way back to the creation stories, and to God who made “terra firma,” a solid place for us to stand in the midst of all the chaotic primordial waters of creation; a God who brought order out of the chaos of the original materials of the creation.ⁱⁱⁱ

Storms in Scripture—for example, in the books of Jonah and Job, as well as this storm described in Mark’s gospel—often coincide with, and appear even as the external expressions of, the internal storms of human beings such as the characters we find in these texts. Similarly, in literature, storms often signify a character’s inner turmoil. So, for example, in Shakespeare’s King Lear, Lear’s mad howls mix with those of a raging storm when his two eldest daughters betray him. Or, in the Frank Baum books, and later movie adaptation, about the Land of Oz, the orphaned Dorothy finds her world turned upside down when the vortex of a tornado carries her to the bewitched Land of Oz.^{iv}

As our gospel reads, during the storm the disciples wake Jesus and he stands up as though he were exorcizing a demon, and rebukes the powers of death which batter against the boat and seemingly threaten the lives on board. Suddenly, all is calm again and the disciples are overcome with awe. As the writer of Psalm 107 states, “Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He stilled the

storm to a whisper and quieted the waves of the sea” (vv. 28-29). Jesus takes the distress and panic of the disciples in the boat, and responds not from on high or from some safe distance, but from within the whirlwind, within the eye of the storm and of their fear. And, as the eye of a storm is a calm center, a still-point; so, also, in touch with his own deep center, Jesus stills both the storm and the inner storm of his disciples’ fear. In doing so, Jesus both proclaims and embodies a deep trust in the fundamental goodness of God at work in the midst of trouble and tragedy.^v And we also have the God-given capacity to respond from our own still-point, or Christ-center, to the storms and fears of our own being, and to the panic and pain (and possibilities) in others. And when clinging to things ends, God begins.^{vi}

In the Hebrew language the word for “devil” can be translated “the one who cannot respond.” The demon, the evil that surrounds us, the panic within us, is the lack of response. This immobilizing panic sets in so that we don’t listen and think. Our inability to respond creates almost a temporary insanity if the fear or pain is great enough. One thing about psychopaths is they simply cannot feel or respond to what their victims are feeling. Jesus could very much feel what those around him felt, and he responded appropriately. By his willingness to live fully into our humanity and bear the consequences of his commitment, including facing into a storm with his panicked disciples, and later, by suffering torture and a sense of God-forsakenness, yet also responding with forgiveness while hanging on a cross—Jesus himself becomes the answer to the disciples’ and all our fears. Only by God taking on the deep questions and profound suffering of humankind in Himself—in becoming Jesus and living and dying as one of us—could God give humanity any meaning to the meaninglessness of suffering. And only by entering into the eye of our storms could God in Christ provide support, strength and courage to rebuild broken lives and shattered dreams. We encounter God in Jesus, who, rather than explaining to us, becomes one of us; and who, rather than protecting us, suffers with us, supports us; and through his dying and rising, conquers the presumed power of fear and suffering, evil and senseless tragedy. How this is so, we don’t know. It is a matter of trust. In Jesus, we see God freely taking a journey towards tragedy *through* tragedy. And through that journey are we enabled to take the disciples’ journey through fear and pain and despair, to gratitude, compassion and understanding. Obviously this journey is no quick fix for all that is disturbing in life. This faith journey with Jesus requires risk instead of safety, depth instead of glibness. It requires trust rather than certitude. God’s will for us only is that we trust—have faith—that God is forever with us. Even if God doesn’t defend and protect us from all perils and dangers, God does support us *in* all perils and dangers. God gives us no explanation for suffering and evil—He only gives us God’s very self in Jesus, who is forever with us, continually repairing the world and restoring broken lives and who enlists us to join him “until God is all in all.”^{vii}

So, when our boats are rocked, these powerful Biblical stories say: Don’t seize up. Be not afraid—or rather, don’t become your fear. Imagine the possible responses. The only way I know of trying to make sense out of a senseless world is by making it relational, in seeking to build bonds of our common humanity. So, sure, our God is a God of justice, and justice will be the response in Charleston. Yet, as the families of the victims of this horrific shooting showed in their response of forgiveness, which amazes many of us—as

William Sloane Coffin put it, “True, [if we love the good,] we have to hate evil; else we’re sentimental. But if we hate [the] evil more than we love the good, we just become damn good haters, and of those the world already has too many.”^{viii}

So, pray for the calm you’ll need—not to escape the storm, but to survive it in order to do something better. And when the boat rocks and others are in pain or grief, pray for the response of the One who is the still-point of our storms, the One we now call friend, brother and Lord. And pray that that centered response can be alive in you.^{ix}

ⁱ It was Jesus who took the initiative for this crossing. Accompanied by his disciples, he set out for the eastern banks of the lake. Then after the fatigue of the day, Jesus fell asleep. And then it began to blow a gale, which caused panic among his companions. On a certain Friday during Passover not long after, he will be engulfed in the sleep of death, and the faith of his friends again will vacillate. But as an early Church leader, Melito of Sardis, describes this sleep of death, we who hear this story of the storm, are called to remember something about who it was that slept on the boat, and who hung on the cross until death. Melito writes,

“So He has come to us. So although without a body, God has formed for God a body like ours. The one who appeared as a lamb, remained the shepherd; He who was seen as a servant did not renounce His status as Son; He was borne by Mary and clothed with God ...appearing as a child he did not deny the eternity of His nature ...as human himself needing nourishment [and sleep], yet as God ceaselessly nourishing the world... He stood before Pilate and sat by the Father; He hung on the cross and supported the universe.” (Melito, Bishop of Sardis, Fragment 14).

See also the testimony from Gregory of Nazianzus,

“For we do not sever the man from the godhead, but lay down...the unity and identity of him who of old was not human but God, but...who in these last days has assumed humanity for our salvation, mortal in his flesh, immortal in his godhead; circumscribed in his body, uncircumscribed in the spirit; at one earthly and heavenly, tangible and intangible, comprehensible and incomprehensible...one and the same who was man, and also God.”

ⁱⁱ William McD. Tully, “Don’t Rock the Boat” (New York: St. Bartholomew’s Church, June 25, 2006)

ⁱⁱⁱ Finally, this story also reminds us of the way Jesus began his own ministry. In Mark’s gospel, it all begins with his being tested by Satan in the wilderness. We might say today that it was the challenge of confronting his own inner demons. He was being called to a position of power. Would he concede to the demons that lust for power within? That initial struggle, and the way Jesus resolved it by turning away from being spectacular and power driven, defined his way of being the savior of the world.

^{iv} Cited in “Storm” in *The Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism*, Ami Ronnberg and Kathleen Martin, eds., The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images (Cologne, Germany: TASCHEN, 2010), p. 66.

^v Out of his calm center—his still-point—Jesus is able to see the whole, the meaning, the dance, as it were, and make it so. As T.S. Eliot put it, “Except for the point, the still point, There would be no dance, and there is only the dance” (T. S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton” in Four Quartets ((1943) San Diego: Harvest Book/Harcourt, Inc., 1971)). The fuller text: “At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless; / Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is, / But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity, / Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards, / Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point, / There would be no dance, and there is only the dance. I can only say, there we have been: but I cannot say where. And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time.”

^{vi} That's what Jesus was doing in the midst of that storm: not displaying panic or fear, but responding, as he responded earlier in the wilderness to his own demons and his own possibilities. No doubt Mark was addressing his gospel to a persecuted and terrified church, and places this account here in order to exhort and encourage his community in their resoluteness and faith. How can the people of God get through such tumults and dangers without turning for help to Him whom the sea and the wind obey, and who is always there with us, in the same boat with them, even when he sleeps—for as we read in the 121st Psalm: “He will not let your foot be moved, and he who watches over you will not fall asleep. Behold, he who keeps watch over Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep” (vv. 3-4). Again, “As human himself needing nourishment [and sleep], yet as God ceaselessly nourishing the world... He stood before Pilate and sat by the Father; He hung on the cross and supported the universe.” As for ourselves, living in the storms of violence and wars and preparations for war, and in the face of climate changes and increasingly violent weather patterns, why should we, too, not have faith and hope and endurance, in spite of everything?

^{vii} 1 Corinthians 15:28; Ephesians 1:23

^{viii} William Sloane Coffin, Credo (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 20.

^{ix} See also Tully, *Ibid*