

The Power at the Heart of the Universe
Sermon by Rev. Judith Fulp-Eickstaedt, Guest Preacher
Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean, VA
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I Samuel 17:32-49, Mark 4:35-41

It's thunderstorm time again. The heat of summer is rolling in and the humidity hangs thick in the air most days. Some of you probably remember that just about this time last year, McLean, Falls Church, and Arlington were hit by some really big storms. I remember one storm in particular. It was a Tuesday morning and at about 5:30 a.m., a full half hour before my alarm would have awakened me, a loud clap of thunder woke everyone in our house. Aaron went downstairs to read as the storm continued to build outside. Before long I had two teenage girls and a cat in my bed. I didn't blame them one bit. It felt like that the storm was right on top of our house.

I wonder if that's the kind of storm that came up on the Sea of Galilee the night Jesus and the disciples went out to cross over to the other side. The Sea of Galilee is notorious for storms like that, quick and violent storms brought about when cool winds from the hills to the north blow down and mix with warm air from the Mediterranean Sea. It might have happened just that way. The wind started to kick up and that eerie feeling that precedes a storm settled over the sea. Then waves began to roll higher and higher until the disciples became truly frightened, and cried out to Jesus, who was asleep on a pillow in the front of the boat.

There is something primal about that story. It speaks to those desperate moments of life when you think, "What is happening here? This is out of control." And there in the middle of the story is Jesus, resting, after a long day of preaching and teaching.

It makes me think of all those Easter Sundays in Statesville when we would go to my Aunt's house after church. Aaron and I would have been up since 5:00 a.m. getting ready for the sunrise service. So every time, we would say on the way over there, "we are not going to fall asleep this year. It is so rude." But, of course, long before the meal was served one or the other or both of us would be snoring on the couches.

The thing about this story, though, is that it really feels rude, or just plain wrong, for Jesus to be asleep with all that is going on around him. The disciples are frantically trying to keep their craft from going down. And their master, who asked them to cross the sea in the first place, is fast asleep. The disciples wake Jesus up with a question that echoes through time, a question whispered in prayers in such hallowed spaces as hospital rooms and refugee camps. It is a question that shakes the walls of prisons and hovers over natural disasters and sometimes even spills from the lips of children... "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

In response to the question, or simply in response to being awakened and realizing the danger they are all facing, Jesus rebukes the wind and calls out to the sea, "Peace. Be still." And everything stops. Just like that. One minute a raging storm. The next dead calm. The story catches me in all the right places of turmoil in my life and pulls me in with its promise of salvation at the hand of Jesus.

The story of David and Goliath is another such story. Goliath, by all accounts, was a very nasty enemy. His size is so exaggerated that it's impossible for us to tell how really big or tall he was. But one thing is certain. He was a big, big man. And David was a small, small boy.

I staged a musical about David and Goliath one year, and we cast a 2nd grader as David and Aaron as Goliath. Aaron, who is really a big teddy bear got down in this little kid's face and just roared. Then when he was hit with the stone from the slingshot Aaron took a flatfall onto the chancel. The whole church shook.

As big as Goliath was and as small as David was, David in his heart of hearts knew that God was with him and that he had never faced anything alone. He had come up against lions and bears as a shepherd and they had not destroyed him. He didn't attribute that to his own shepherding skills either, but to God's power. He didn't say, "Get out here. I'm gonna whup your butt, Goliath, because I have defeated bears and lions." He said, "The Lord will deliver you into my hand." And then a young boy took a sling shot and did what many strong men had not been able to do. He faced down Goliath of Gath and defeated him.

Now, let me say up front that there are some not so great messages in that story about violence and war, especially that whole "God is on my side" thing. But there is also a message here for us about things that seem too big for us to handle. What are the Goliaths in your life?

Does addiction make you want to crawl in a hole and hide? Has pain or loss become more than you can bear? Has sickness or the possibility of death become a specter so big and present in your life that it is all you can think about? Has change overwhelmed you? Is the past standing in the way of your future? What is big and scary to you? What makes you feel small and insignificant?

In the face of an enemy that made him feel small indeed, David stood up because of his trust in God. As one commentator put it, "David knew he was no match for the giant soldier. But he also knew the giant soldier was no match for the living God."

It would be easy to take these two stories, a story where Jesus stilled a mighty storm, and a story where a young boy defeated a giant because of his trust in God and write a sermon outlining the assurance that nothing bad will ever happen to us and that God will deliver us if it does. But the problem with that message is that over the course of the day or the week, something would begin to gnaw at the gut of both the preacher and the listeners, something that would in the end draw us all to the conclusion, "that sounds good, but it's just not true."

We've watched on the news as hurricanes came ashore, as people were wiped away by a tsunami. Just in the past few months we've seen parts of Nashville underwater; we've seen a giant sinkhole open up in Guatemala City; and we've watched in horror as more oil that we can reasonably wrap our minds around is slowly making its way onto white sand beaches and into precious wetlands, killing birds and fish and destroying lives and communities.

So when Jesus stills the storm and then turns to his disciples and says, "Why are you afraid?" we want to shout with them and for them, "Helloooo. We were nearly drowning there, Jesus. How can you not be afraid under those circumstances?"

That fear is very real to us because our experience with disaster is not limited to these catastrophes we have seen on TV. We've all known very faithful people who have endured tragedies. And at some time in our lives almost all of us experience that "dark night of the soul" when we ourselves are struggling to keep our head above water, when despite our fervent prayers and our best efforts, the storms of life continue to come.

Sometimes we see those storms coming for miles off... when parents are slowly aging or our own forgetfulness or health issues are becoming increasingly problematic... when financial difficulty builds

and builds to the point of finally losing a business or a job... when a move is calculated or a change is expected. Some storms you can even plan for...

At other times it is like a cow drops right out of the sky...

The last time I preached on this text I told a very funny story I had heard about a group of Japanese fishermen whose boat sank when a cow dropped out of the sky and struck their boat, shattering the hull and causing the boat to sink in a matter of minutes. The cow had supposedly been dropped from 30,000 feet out of the hull of a Russian cargo plane. I since found out that the story is an urban legend, something that never happened but was reported to be true in several publications. Too bad. It's a good story. Any story that involves flying cows has something going for it. I wish it were true. And I'm telling it even when I know it is not true, because that's just how it feels sometimes, isn't it, when something comes out of literally nowhere and busts up the security you thought you had.

In a way that's what happened to the disciples that night on the Sea of Galilee. I'm not just talking about the storm now. I'm also talking about the moment when they realized that the man with whom they had been travelling had the power to calm the water and still the wind. The New Revised Standard Version text I read says that the disciples were filled with great awe. The way we tend to use the word awesome these days that would lead us to believe that the disciples found Jesus' actions very impressive, even wonderful. But a more direct and accurate translation of the original Greek is that "the disciples feared a great fear."

We have so tamed this text in our minds that it's almost impossible to get back to the original feeling the disciples had when Jesus shouted at the stormy sea using the same words he used to cast out demons, "Peace. Be Still." The sea was, for them, a symbol of demonic and destructive powers. The Psalms are filled with this imagery, as is the creation story, where the chaotic forces of the sea gave way to dry land. And is it any wonder the ancients would have understood it in this way? Even today with our knowledge of tides and currents, our ability to track and predict storms, the truth is we cannot control the sea and it is often deadly.

Against such a force as this Jesus spoke a word and all was quiet. And the disciples feared a great fear. This great fear gave rise to a question, one that makes this story so important to the telling of Jesus' life that some version of it appears in all four gospels. It is as if the gospel writers understood that no gospel could be complete without this story and without the identity question it raises: "Who, then, is this, that even the wind and the seas obey him?" And if Jesus could do what he did with the storm, then what does he have in mind to do with me?

Up until that moment it had all seemed so safe being with Jesus. They had seen him do marvelous things. They had loved being a part of his entourage. But in this event on the sea, the disciples recognized that Jesus was in touch with a power beyond their understanding, and it scared them.

The disciples' reaction reminds me of a story Fred Craddock once told about a pastor he knew who went to visit one of his parishioners in the hospital. The woman was suffering from a terminal disease and the pastor went to visit her, knowing that, at the end of that visit, he would pray the kind of prayer that acknowledges the desperation of the situation, and that accepts, as fact, that not much is going to change. I've prayed prayers like that. All pastors have. Because sometimes that's the only honest prayer you can pray.

But in the course of their visit the woman prevailed upon the pastor to beg God to heal her. And so, against his better judgment, he prayed fervently for her healing, even while he understood what a long-shot that prayer was. And he left. But a few days later he was back for another visit. The woman was

sitting up in bed. The tubes had been removed, and the curtains were open. She said to him, “You won’t believe what has happened. The doctors noticed some changes the other day, and called for more x-rays, and they can no longer see any sign of a tumor! I’m going home tomorrow.”

The pastor said later, “When I got out to the parking lot, I looked up into the skies and said, “Don’t ever do that to me again!”

I know just how that pastor felt because I’ve had similar prayer experiences. I got a call in the night on a Saturday from an older parishioner whose wife had been brought into the hospital experiencing grand mal seizures. The doctor told him she was dying. I sat with him as we watched her tremble and jolt with each seizure, and then fall into unresponsiveness.

Early the next morning before I left for church I asked this man, who had been a pastor all of his life, what I should pray for. He said right off that he didn’t want his wife to suffer needlessly, but that if she could get better he wanted to see some sign of that. I took his hand, his daughter’s hand, and his wife’s hand, and I prayed, “O God, if death is to be the answer to this prayer, then bring it on...but if there is any hope for healing here then bring that on too.” And I went to church.

Later that same day, someone in the hospital room said, “I’ll be right back.” And from the bed, a tiny voice repeated, “I’ll be right back.” And you know she did come back. She got more years of playing cards with her grandchildren. And I got just a tiny touch of what it is to connect with that power at the heart of the universe...and I don’t mind saying that it was a little bit scary. I didn’t shake my fist at God or anything. I just said “thank you,” but I was very aware that there was a power at work I could not begin to understand.

That power is evident not only in situations where healing happens, but also in situations where people find the strength to get through when healing does not happen. Cognitive science tells us that our personal energy surges when we most need it. “I don’t know how you get through something like that,” I have often heard people say about this tragedy or that hardship. But I have also seen many times, how someone who could never have imagined they had the strength, found the resources from beyond to get through an impossible situation. I’ve heard men and women, in the darkest moments of their lives, say, “God is so present to me. I can’t explain it, but I have real peace.”

That’s what I think the story of the disciples on the Sea of Galilee is all about. It’s a story about hope in the midst of struggle, a story about the power that is beyond our understanding, a power which is at the heart of the universe and yet is available to us. Mostly we hover around the edges of it, drawn to experience it, but holding back because we are afraid to open ourselves to what that power might do in our own lives, how it might transform us and what it might demand of us.

This miracle of the stilling of the storm on the Sea of Galilee is not a flat story. It is a story meant to live in dreams and to surface in our imagination when we most need it. It is a story that is meant to show us a truth that is beyond any one person’s struggle.

Maybe what the disciples in the boat needed to learn was that the presence of the storm was not the whole truth of their situation. It had all of their attention, but sleeping right there in the boat was the person who could help them tap into that power from beyond, that power at the heart of the universe, the very heart of God. It is the power of love that drives out demons and makes the unclean clean. It is the power of creation that out of chaos made life, and set the stars in their appointed courses. It is the power of grace, which can calm the stormy sea, silence the gale, and meet us in a still small voice. It is the power of hope, which speaks in the most troubling moments of human existence. These seven little verses give us a story to live by, a story to hold on to.

Fredrick Buechner invites us to grasp the truth of the story in this way:

“Christ sleeps in the deepest selves of all of us, and...in whatever way we can call on him as the fishermen did in their boat to come awake within us and to give us courage, to give us hope, to show us, each one, our way. May he be with us especially when the winds go mad and the waves run wild, as they will for all of us before we’re done, so that even in their midst we may find peace, find him.”
(From *Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons*).

This text is a great one for our college students to carry with them and it leads us to a prayer for them and for the whole church, the people of God in this place, Immanuel Presbyterian Church. It is a prayer for our children who sometimes can’t sleep at night because they have fears they are afraid to speak. It is a prayer for our teens as they face temptations, seek direction, and as they go out on their own. It is a prayer for every adult here, too, for the young adult and the young at heart. It is a prayer that we will step boldly into whatever future God has in store for us, that we will not be afraid to go where God asks us to go, even if the way leads us out onto stormy seas. For, as our Sunday School teachers, pastors, and youth leaders constantly remind us, God does not send us out alone, but stays very near.

Friends, remember what you have been taught, and what faith would have us hold on to. We have never faced anything alone before. And God goes with us now. Jesus walks beside us. The Holy Spirit resides within us and around us. Peace. Be Still. The power at the heart of the universe, flowing out of the very heart of God, vibrates with love and goodness, with a confidence and strength beyond human understanding, and with peace the world cannot give. It is more than we can comprehend, but it is available even now, yes, even to us, as we open our hearts to receive these gifts.

In Jesus’ name.

Amen.

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