

Jesus and the Storm
Mark 4.35-41
Pentecost +4
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Elizabeth Mangham Lott
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

Last Sunday we were blowing bubbles. The scripture for the day was a pair of parables about the task of spreading the good news of God's love in the world around us. Our job is to send out news of God's love, live God's love into the world, and not worry about how and where that message will be received. Ours is the task of joyfully living and loving in Jesus' name.

The next morning, I sat down at my desk to begin the cycle for a new week. It's the typical morning routine of calendar, notes for appointments and meetings, a scan of how many emails need immediate response, and a look through social media. It was there that I saw the images from Syria and Turkey. Twenty-six of them. I didn't know. I didn't know that while we were sitting here in worship blowing bubbles, thousands of Syrians were waiting at the border to enter Turkey. Thousands had been waiting for at least two days already in scenes documented by a photographer on Turkey's side of the fence. Then on Sunday morning, literally as we sat here blowing bubbles, Syrians began to rip the fence apart to get to safety. And if the adults couldn't fit through, they sent their infants and children.

I called out to Tim in the next office, "Do you know about this? Have you seen this?" I tried to describe some of the images until I could no longer speak about it. Then once I was alone, I stared at their faces, through my computer screen, in silence.

A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat...Jesus 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?"

I did what we all do. I sat with my awareness of that grief and horror, then I pushed those images into the corner of my brain where tragedy and global crises live. I shut the door to that dusty storage closet and moved right back into my routine. Lunch appointments, planning meetings, and, last week only, three nights of youth camp at St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church filling in for Stephanie who was attending a denominational meeting in Texas.

By mid-week it was my second night with teenagers from Virginia and Tennessee. They came to New Orleans to work on houses and gardens as part of a post-Katrina endeavor to rebuild hope in the city. About 8:00 Wednesday night, I was ending my time of teaching and worship with the teenagers as we talked about the IMAGO DEI imprinted in them from creation. Creation is filled with goodness and beauty and possibility because God breathed these things into being. I told them of their own goodness and beauty and

possibility because they, too, were breathed into being by God. They lined up before me to receive a blessing. For a few minutes, I held oil in my hands, just as I have done here, and I traced a cross onto the faces of any who wanted to come. I called them each by name and whispered to each one, "You are made in the image of God. You are beautiful. You are strong. You are loved." I went home with a full heart, quite certain those seeds and bubbles of God's love were moving about and landing where they will.

The next morning, about 6:30 a.m., I rolled over in bed and reached for my phone; a common morning habit. I began to scroll through weather forecasts and new social media messages. Then I quickly realized something horrible had happened in Charleston. Something terrifying and hate-filled. While my fingers were covered with oil and I was speaking the love of God over and into a group of young people who came to leave their mark on our city, another pastor, just three years older, led a small group in study and prayer. Another pastor spoke the words of God's love and blessing over and into the people in his midst. I got into my car and drove home. He and eight others were gunned down in their church and left within the sacred walls of Charleston's Emanuel AME Church.

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I did what we all do. I sat with my awareness of that grief and horror. But I knew I could not push this into that mental storage closet where all of the world's tragedy sits and gets an occasional nod or passing prayer. *Lord, bless these unspeakable things that are too big for me to carry.* I could not deny what happened in that sacred space. I could not deny my fear and anger and shame and grief. I could not deny the convenient reality that I could say nothing. I could do nothing. And I could not deny the truth that when I remain silent on things that matter, I contribute to a world that allows such evil things to happen.

On Thursday, I opened the chapel for prayer, and I got very quiet. I read a lot. I waited for the names of the victims. I waited for information on the killer. I sat with my fear and anger and shame and grief. And I came across Brene Brown's response¹ to the attack at Mother Emanuel. She challenged readers NOT to push this story into the dark closets of our minds. She wrote:

When we deny our stories, they define us.
When we own our stories, we get to write a brave new ending.

There is an unfinished story of race in our country. We deny this is so. We call ourselves post-racial. We claim tolerance is the same thing as friendship. We claim proximity is the same thing as mutuality. We say opportunity and equality are there for the taking if people will simply try harder and pull themselves out of poverty. We claim anyone who speaks of these things is taking a side politically as though loving neighbors as we love ourselves is

¹ <http://brenebrown.com/2015/06/18/own-our-history-change-the-story/>

the same as tax reform and trade policy. We push it away. We stop talking. We hide. We deny. We can continue to deny the story. Or we can write a brave new ending.

Jesus had spent at least a day telling every story he could think up to communicate the individual's call to discipleship. Each person has the image of God within them. Each person has the capacity to spread God's goodness and beauty and love throughout the world. Each person can partner with God, as dreamed in that poem from the very beginning of scripture, and care for the earth and its animals and each other. Scatter seeds, blow bubbles, do the thing that makes your heart sing and do it for the glory of God.

By the end of the day, he was tired. And he was done with crowds. And he was ready to get away. So he and his small group of followers got into a boat to cross the lake and find rest. As they traveled, a storm came up that almost overcame them. It was a storm that threatened to destroy them. And they were terrified. Jesus 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?"

And we know what happened. We know he wiped the sleep from his eyes, looked out into the storm and calmed it. And however he stopped it did nothing to take away the fear the disciples felt. However he stopped that storm from raging seemed to stir up some new fear in them. The wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. And *then* Jesus said, "Why are you afraid?" Still shaking and uncertain of what they'd witnessed, the disciples turned to each other and asked, "Who is this Jesus?"

David Henson writes, "I don't really think the miracle in this story is about Jesus calming the storm and taking control. The miracle in this story is that Jesus was with the disciples in the water-logged and weatherbeaten boat, experiencing the same terrible storm, the same terrible waves, the same terrible danger.

And that alone should have been enough.

God's power isn't in the control of creation or of people, but in being in covenant and relationship with them. It isn't in imposing the divine will or insisting on its own way but in sojourning with us as we fumble around and make our way in the world. God's power is not in miraculous interventions, pre-emptive strikes in the cosmic war against suffering and evil, but in inviting us to build a kingdom out of love, peace and justice with God. God's power is not in the obliterating of what is bad in the world, but in empowering us to build something good in this world."²

The way of Jesus is the pairing of this Sunday and the last. The way of Jesus is in the ease and goodness of moving through the world in love and beauty and sharing that abundance everywhere. And the way of Jesus is immediately facing the storms that will rage, the storms that will threaten to end us all, and responding not in fear and terror but with an

² <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/davidhenson/2015/06/1804/>

abundant love that is powerful enough and bold enough to rewrite stories. This storm does not have the final word. God's shalom does.

Why were the disciples still afraid? They were afraid of the storm, not realizing Christ was with them through the chaos. But their fear continued as Jesus' power was unleashed in their midst. And I think we sense that power even if we cannot define it. We sense that power is near, and it scares us, too. We dare not wake the sleeping Christ because we know deep within us that whatever is unleashed cannot be bottled and contained and put back in its place.

Friends, if we want to write a brave new ending...if we want to calm the storms that are raging around us...there is a bold power in the presence of Christ waiting right here in our midst. The way of Jesus is not easy and lovely. The way of Jesus is not simple and pleasant. The way of Jesus is both beauty and risk. The way of Jesus is both peace-naming and truth-telling. The way of Jesus is lived out in the still moments of our days and in the horror of the sea that would love to pull us under. It is both. The way of Jesus is lived out in all these things.

What way will we choose? Will we choose the way of self-preservation and denial? Or will we choose the difficult way of God's love?

As we consider our response, I share these words of prayer from my friend Sarah Shelton: "[W]hatever we do in whatever time we have left, wherever we go, may we in whatever way we can call on [Christ] 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...we may find Christ.

This is, ultimately, my prayer for each of us. It is my prayer for our churches where we desire that the presence of Christ will be among the pews and the music, in the teaching and in the prayers, in the giving and in the taking, in the rough and in the smooth sailing. But most of all I pray that the presence of Christ will be so alive and awake in our spirits that truth will not only be spoken but heard and carried out into the world...so that something like love may be done."³

Amen.

³ Frederick Buchner and Sarah Shelton: http://day1.org/1326-the_sleeping_jesus