

Sermon for Sunday, June 20, 2021 - "Grounded in God's Peace and Power"

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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Beloved people of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

This story raises a lot of questions for me. I know Jesus calms the storm and that's all good, but why does he sleep through the storm at first? Why doesn't he do something sooner? And why isn't he a little kinder with the disciples?

I imagine myself as one of the disciples on that boat. As the wind starts to whip and the waves beat against the boat, I'm a little nervous. But Jesus is here, it'll be OK if he'd ever wake up. Then the boat fills with water and starts going under and I panic a bit. Jesus just keeps snoring away on his cushion. Finally, some of us wake Jesus asking, "Don't you care that we're perishing?" Jesus does get up and calm the storm. But then he turns to us and says, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

If I *had* been on that boat, I'm pretty sure I would've reacted badly at that point. I'd have been tempted to snap back at Jesus, "Umm, we almost died while you took a nice little nap. Go easy on us! Have a little compassion please." Except maybe these are honest questions from Jesus. Maybe Jesus is genuinely trying to understand why the disciples are afraid, why they are struggling with faith. Maybe he is practicing empathy.

Empathy involves working to understand what others are feeling. Sympathy involves feeling bad yourself when others are hurting; but empathy involves focusing on the other person and their experience of the situation. Jesus has no sympathy for the disciples. He doesn't feel bad because they're scared. Yet I think Jesus really does want to understand why they are so afraid. I think he has real empathy for them.

Empathy has been on my mind a lot recently. This week Vicar Kathryn and I had conversations with the Good Shepherd members who have served as Shepherds to the congregation during the pandemic. I was struck again by the Shepherd's empathy for those in their flocks. They worked to understand what you needed, what would be helpful and not intrusive. They've been thoughtful and sensitive as they've carried out their roles.

Now as we bring the formal Shepherd and Flock program to a close, we asked the Shepherds about their hopes for Good Shepherd. One man said, "In a culture where empathy is increasingly rare, I hope we at Good Shepherd are always known as empathetic people." That comment struck me as so helpful. I hope we will practice empathy as we move into a new normal after the pandemic. I hope we'll be guided by empathy as we enter more deeply into antiracism work together as a congregation. I hope we who have white privilege will seek to understand what it's like to be black, indigenous, Asian, Hispanic - what it's like to be viewed as "other" because of the color of your skin. We can practice such empathy because Jesus does this for us. Jesus has entered into every-

thing we face as human beings seeking to understand it, focused on us, focused on what it is like to be human.

But Jesus doesn't only show empathy. He also has a non-anxious presence amid the storms of this world. A non-anxious presence is a way of being, a way of standing when things are difficult. It involves having one foot in the hard situation and one foot grounded in hope and calm. This allows someone to be with you in something painful and not get swallowed up by it themselves.

I think this is what Jesus is doing on the boat with the disciples. He is with them in the storm and yet he isn't swept away by the fear and panic. He is grounded in God's peace and God's power. From that place of calm, Jesus can be a helpful presence to the disciples, even if he sounds a bit harsh. Jesus can help the disciples, and help us, to not be consumed by fear, to put our trust in God.

A key message throughout all of scripture is "do not be afraid." That phrase is repeated more times than any phrase in scripture. Yet how are we supposed to not be afraid when there are storms, viruses, car accidents, cancer, injustice - so many fearful things? "Do not be afraid" can be a hard message to hear when we just want some sympathy amid all our fears.

Yet Jesus' challenging, empathetic, and non-anxious presence helps the disciples to know that fear does not have to consume them. They can have fear and yet not be afraid. As my friend Stacey Nalean-Carlson says, Jesus' presence assures us that "*you may fear, but you are not afraid. Fear doesn't define you. Fear isn't who you are.*"¹ Jesus helps to ground us in something greater than the chaos and pain of this world. Jesus grounds us in God's peace and God's power. Jesus shows us that God is always present, always at work. And, as another of our Shepherds told me this year, "Sometimes God calms the storm, sometimes God calms the child."

Beloved of God, we face many storms, many fearful things in our world, in our country, as a congregation. Yet we can engage all that comes in an empathetic, non-anxious way together. Jesus is present with us, focused on us. Jesus' calm presence helps us to face our fears and not be swallowed up by them. We have all that we need.

Thanks be to God.

¹ From Pr. Stacey Nalean-Carlson's sermon for Easter 2020, April 12, 2020.
<http://staceynaleancarlson.com/2020/04/12/fear-and-great-joy/>