

IN THE BOAT TOGETHER

Sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, June 21, 2015

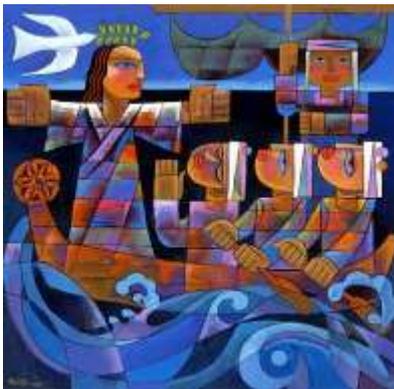
Pentecost 4/Ordinary 12 – 10:00 a.m.

First Congregational Church, UCC, Haddam, CT

“In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity”

Mark 4:35-41

On that day, when evening had come, Jesus said to the disciples, “Let us go across to the other side.” And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm 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?” 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?”



He Qi, “Peace Be Still”

In San Pedro, California, there is a Roman Catholic Church named “Mary, Star of the Sea.” This congregation was originally founded to provide for the spiritual care of Italian Catholic immigrants, most of whom derived their livelihood from fishing. Atop the church building is a large statue of Mary the mother of Jesus, facing out to the Pacific Ocean; fishermen returning from weeks or months at sea would see this statue and rejoice in their safe return from the dangers of deep-sea fishing. Inside the sanctuary of the church are two large stained-glass windows with nautical themes from the story of Jesus: the miraculous catch of fish, and the stilling of the storm.

It should come as no surprise that a church whose members derived their livelihood from fishing, and whose very existence depended on the financial success of those who went to sea in fishing boats, should give a place of honor in its worship space to visual representations of Jesus’ care for the well-being of fisherfolk. For instance, any worshipper who glanced at or meditated on the stilling of the storm stained glass window would recall not only the biblical story of Jesus, but also the times when they, or their family members, had experienced God’s protective presence in the midst of a storm at sea.

Those of us who do not fish for our livelihood, or are not accustomed to the “visual piety” of meditating on images, can nonetheless find our connection with this text in more verbal and/or metaphorical ways. This means that we will need to engage in a close and careful reading not only of this text, but also of our present context.

First, a close reading of the text. On a literal, superficial level, this episode portrays Jesus as a miracle worker who is able to intervene in and change the course of natural phenomena such as wind and waves. Jesus exercises the same power and authority as God does in Psalm 107, especially verses 28-29:

Then [those who went down to the sea in ships]
cried to the LORD in their trouble,
and [God] brought them out from their distress;
[God] made the storm be still,
and the waves of the sea were hushed.

This first level of reading can serve as a kind of proof-text for Jesus’ divinity. Such a reading can be persuasive to those who base their faith on their concept of the “literal” truth of every biblical verse. It is not likely to be persuasive, however, for a reader like myself who is steeped in an empirical, scientific perspective on natural phenomena such as hurricanes and earthquakes and tsunamis. These are primal forces of nature beyond any human control or influence. Even though televangelist Pat Robertson once claimed to have changed the course of a hurricane through prayer, we know that this was a bogus claim. However much respect we have for Jesus, and however we might understand his divinity, we still have difficulty imagining him literally stilling a violent storm on Lake Galilee.

A second level of reading this narrative is not literal, but literary. Encountering the text through the lenses of biblical scholarship and literary analysis, we see that the text is not only about the power and authority of Jesus, it is also about following Jesus, about becoming a disciple or an apprentice of this itinerant Galilean prophet on whom God has bestowed God's own power and authority. If even "wind and waves obey him," should not we also, as his friends and followers, obey him?

In the chapters and verses preceding today's reading, Jesus is portrayed as a popular teacher and healer. He attracts large crowds in Capernaum, so much so that when he is teaching on the beach at the Sea of Galilee, he has to get into a boat so that the crowds won't crush him when they push toward him.

When evening comes, after a long day of healing and teaching, Jesus says to his disciples, "Let us go across to the other side" (of the Sea of Galilee). This large body of water is a fresh-water lake containing many species of fish. It is also subject to sudden and powerful storms. Those whose livelihood is fishing on this lake need to be carefully attuned to the weather, lest they be caught off guard by one of those sudden storms.

Before he began his ministry, Jesus was a carpenter, not a fisherman. When he invited the four fishermen to follow him and fish for people, they left their boats and nets and walked on land with him. When he taught from a boat, it was along the shoreline. But when he decided to cross to the other side of the lake in a boat, he was putting himself—and his disciples—at risk of one of those sudden storms.

We could say, from this story, that when we get into the boat with Jesus, there's no guarantee of smooth sailing. We can also say, from this story, that whatever happens, we're in the boat together. For many Christian readers and hearers of this story, the boat has become a symbol of the church. We in the church are in the church together with Jesus.

We in this church in Haddam are also in the boat together, in the church together with Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. This congregation was struck this past Wednesday evening by a violent storm of terrorism. Nine Christians of African descent were murdered in cold blood by a young white male armed with the twisted ideology of white supremacy and a .45-caliber handgun.



Here are the nine African American Christians whose precious lives were taken from them by this race-based, hate-based act of domestic terrorism:

The Rev. Clementa Pinckney, 41: A state senator and the senior pastor of Emanuel, he was married to Jennifer Benjamin and the father of two children, Eliana and Malana. He was a 1995 graduate of Allen University and got his master's degree at the University of South Carolina in 1999. He served in the state Legislature starting in 2000; The Post and Courier says black fabric was draped over Pinckney's Senate chamber seat on Thursday.

Cynthia Hurd, 54: According to the Charleston County Public Library, she was a 31-year employee who managed the John L. Dart Library for 21 years before heading the St. Andrews Regional Library. A statement said Hurd "dedicated her life to serving and improving the lives of others." The system closed its 16 branches Thursday to honor Hurd and the others who died in the shooting. County officials also say the St. Andrews library will be named for Hurd.

The Rev. Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, 45: A pastor at Emanuel, she was also a speech therapist and high school girls track and field coach, both positions at Goose Creek High School, according to her LinkedIn page. Jimmy Huskey, the school's principal, called her "a true professional ... [who] cared about her students and was an advocate for them." Her son, Chris Singleton, is a baseball player and student at Charleston Southern University. Coleman-Singleton also had two younger children, writes the Post and Courier.

Tywanza Sanders, 26: He was a 2014 graduate in business administration from Allen University in Columbia. Lady June Cole, the interim president of Allen University, described him as "a quiet, well-known student who was committed to his education." Known as Ty, he had worked in sales at department stores such as Beck's and Macy's.

Ethel Lance, 70: She had attended Emanuel for most of her life and worked there as a custodian, as well. From 1968 to 2002, she worked as a custodian at Charleston's Gaillard Municipal Auditorium. The Post and Courier quotes a former colleague as saying, "She was funny and a pleasure to be around. And she was a wonderful mother and grandmother."

Susie Jackson, 87: Lance's cousin, she was a longtime church member.

Depayne Middleton Doctor, 49: The mother of four sang in Emanuel's choir. She had previously directed a community development program in Charleston County. In December, she started a new job as an admissions coordinator at the Charleston campus of her alma mater, Southern Wesleyan University. SWU President Todd Voss said: "Always a warm and enthusiastic leader, DePayne truly believed in the mission of SWU to help students achieve their potential by connecting faith with learning. Our prayers go out to family and friends. This is a great loss for our students and the Charleston region."

The Rev. Daniel Simmons, 74: Simmons survived the initial attack but then died in a hospital operating room. He had previously been a pastor at another church in the Charleston area.

Myra Thompson, 59: She was the wife of the Rev. Anthony Thompson, the vicar of Holy Trinity Reformed Episcopal Church in Charleston.¹

When the violent storm of race-based terrorism struck this historic African American congregation during their Wednesday evening Bible study, nine precious and beautiful people were taken from their families and friends and congregation. When the shooter was arraigned in court, the family members of the victims were given the opportunity to speak to him. In many and various ways, these grieving Christians spoke not out of hatred but out of grace: they offered him their forgiveness.

Some have suggested that the shooter who carried out this massacre was mentally ill. If so, he was infected by our national mental illness of white racism. Sixty years after the passage of the landmark Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts, the mental illness of white racism continues to tear at the fabric of American society. We could say that the pathology of white racism is the original sin of our nation. The pathology of white racism—often undergirded and justified with religious language—led to the genocide of native Americans and the enslavement of African Americans. The murders in Charleston are the legacy of this pathology.

There is, however, another legacy which is working to overcome this pathology. And that is the legacy of the way of Jesus. We know from the biblical witness that Jesus was in sympathy and solidarity with the dispossessed and marginalized people of his time and place. We know from Paul's witness to baptism of the radical equality bestowed on all who were baptized in the name of Jesus. Religious, ethnic, and gender distinctions were no longer cause for discrimination: "There is no longer **Jew or Greek**, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

All of us here today are one in Christ Jesus with the victims of Wednesday's terrorist attack at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston. We are one in Christ Jesus with the friends and family members and fellow church members of those who were murdered in cold blood during their weekly gathering for prayer and Bible study. And so we have prayed for the church and the city of Charleston. For we know from Jesus that we are all in the same boat together. Amen.

¹ <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/06/18/415539516/the-victims-9-were-slain-at-charlestons-emanuel-ame-church>.

A Prayer for Historic Emanuel AME Church of Charleston, SC
Nancy Taylor, Senior Minister of Old South Church in Boston, Massachusetts.

Dear Mother Emanuel:

You, who authored courageous slave rebellions, who suffered and survived wretched bigotry, burnings and earthquake,

You, who worshipped underground when black churches were outlawed ...

Dear Mother Emanuel, in this day of grievous heartache we wrap you in bands of prayer.

We pour out upon your broken hearts the healing balm of Gilead.

You, whose shepherd has been taken from you,

whose building has become a tomb,

whose children are terrified:

We stand with you.

We weep with you.

We rage for you.

We keep vigil with you for your beloved dead.

May the God of Moses and Miriam, of Jesus and the Mary's,

anoint you with healing, furnish you with hope and,

one day, some day, mend your torn hearts and wipe the tears from your swollen eyes.

God help us.