

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
The Rev. Ian Burch
June 24, 2018

Travis and I flew back to Milwaukee from Vancouver eight days ago. We had a short layover in Seattle, and then we enjoyed a fairly smooth flight back into O'Hare. About an hour west of Chicago, the pilot's voice came over the speakers to say, "There's a weather system to the north of the plane. It shouldn't affect us, but I'm going to leave the fasten seat belt sign on. I don't trust it to stay put."

As I was listening to him, I was fascinated by his turn of phrase. "I don't trust the storm to stay put." The pilot was nearly imbuing the storm with agency and and maybe even menace. The idea of an untrustworthy storm sat with me the remainder of the trip.

Imagine my surprise when I read today's Gospel. It's a famous passage, and I imagine that most of you have heard it dozens of times since Sunday school days. Jesus is teaching on one side of the Sea of Galilee, and he immediately stops what he is doing and instructs the disciples to cross to the other side. Just as they are underway, Jesus takes a nap. An untrustworthy storm approaches the fishing boat; the disciples panic and wake Jesus. He calms the storm with a word, leaving the disciples to wonder what kind of teacher they have decided to follow.

I wonder if that storm had some menace. I wonder if the disciples worried for their lives or livelihood. I wonder how they looked at Jesus after the storm was routed.

With due deference to Dr. Freud, I don't think that in this case a storm is a storm.

Imagine every terrifying, untrustworthy, menacing event that has come into your life or into the lives of people you love. Imagine the excesses of a corrupt state. Imagine faithless friends or loves. Imagine sickness, famine, torture. Now imagine them outside the window of your airplane, or just a few miles from your boat.

The faithlessness that is possible by the human heart is staggering. Corporate sin is real and deadly. I can't help but think about the 2000 children detained separately from their parents for the crime of being born in the wrong place, at the wrong time, speaking the wrong language. Our presiding bishop has called those actions un-Christian and un-American. And I found myself having a cynical thought: Christians have done some pretty heinous things in the name of God over the course of history, as have Americans. So, in what way is our current tragedy at the border un-Christian or un-American?

But cynicism will not set us free. Cynicism will help no one and will do nothing to advance the reign of God. When humans get together and put our minds to it, we are capable of madness and great sorrow. That's true. But we follow a God who loves us anyway, if you can even imagine that.

Earlier this week, I taught a lesson to the kids at Vacation Bible Camp. I had told the organizers that I'd be glad to do story time and to just assign me whatever story they thought best. Probably because I didn't claim a preference, they assigned me the crucifixion. I thought and thought and thought: how am I going to teach the crucifixion to kids aged 5-9.

I did my best. I had them act out a little pantomime. I told them that a long time ago in Jerusalem, there were two princes, Herod and Pilate. And they were teaching that people are things, that only the strong are worthy, and that the Emperor is God. And then came along this fellow Jesus. And he taught that people not things, that God has a special place in God's heart for the poor and the weak, and that the Emperor—whoever he or she happens to be at the time—is not God.

I asked the kids: what happens when the princes learn about a new teacher? What happens when a new teacher teaches something different from them. You'd be surprised how quickly the kids grasped the basics of power. They said that the princes would be jealous and that the princes would be mad. And who do angry princes do, I asked. They said that the princes would send the armies. They said that the princes kill Jesus.

It might be an oversimplification, but I think it's a pretty decent analysis of power in the world. The princes can huff and puff and blow and cause quite a storm. But Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, teaches a different lesson and commands that storm to stop.

Christians recognize that the storm is not supreme. The storm is not all there is. The storm will bow before a powerful God who is determined to get all of us to the other side of the sea.

And, of course, we know something in hindsight that those frightened disciples in the boat didn't: Jesus will be tried for his dangerous teaching and ultimately killed by the princes of the world. But death will not be the end for him. Death won't be able to hold his message or his power.

So, even in a week like we've had, don't despair. We really do have the power to make this world look more like the reign of God. And that is because we have Jesus. Right here. Right now. Our God is determined and powerful. The boat is rocking right now, but fear not. It has rocked before, and it will rock again, but Jesus will get the church where it needs to go.

Keep to your life of discipleship: tend the sick, succor the dying, take the princes to task, and build each other up. Those are the actions of God in our midst. Those are the signs that Jesus is in command and is more powerful than the storm, whatever shape it happens to take this week. Amen.