**“Do you not care that we are perishing?”**

a homily by

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St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA

I can only remember one time as a child when my family all prayed together. It was October 17, 1989 at about 9 o’clock at night. The day of the San Francisco earthquake. The eight of us were huddled together on the floor in my parents bedroom...finally together and back in our house after about 4 hours down at the park with other families of the neighborhood, while various people checked for rupture gas lines and structural damage. We knew that over a hundred people had been killed in a massive freeway collapse; and that the world series was being postponed. A fire was still raging close enough that thick clouds of smoke were billowing in the sky behind the park’s tree-line, but how far back was unknown. I remember my mother telling me, “if you see flames, turn and run!”. We had no idea if that afternoon’s quake was “the big one” or just the pre-shock of another large earthquake still to come. I don’t remember the words of our prayer that night, but I imagine they were something along the lines of, “Lord, do you not care that we are perishing down here?”

Of course, in today’s Gospel story, the storm is a literal one. The writers of Mark’s Gospel included this story for its literal value. Having established in the surrounding chapters that Jesus could perform healings, confront and expel demons, possess secret wisdom – this story serves primarily to establish Jesus’ ability to command even the forces of nature. That’s why it ends with the disciples’ other question – who is this then, that even the wind and sea obey him.

But to us as we hear this story and ponder it, the storm is unavoidably metaphorical. The storm is the chaos of our individual and collective lives. It is the recurring, persistent energy of life’s challenges, that again and again beat up against our boats. Our storm might be a fast moving squall – that comes unpredictably from out of nowhere as quickly as the powerful burst of wind and rain that trapped these disciples, and then moves off as quickly as it arose. Or perhaps ours is a gathering storm – one that we could see coming, and yet found ourselves too ignorant, too confident, or too flat out stubborn to avoid. Or perhaps we’re caught in just endless days of steady rain – watching the nearby creek get higher and higher and wondering whether it is going to burst its banks and seep into our foundation.

I would guess that many of us, finding ourselves in one kind of storm or another, have prayed a version of this prayer at least once in our lifetimes. “Lord, do you not care that we are perishing down here?” Perhaps you are praying it today because you are in the midst of your own personal storm? Perhaps you are praying this prayer today because you are aware of the many storms we are all in the midst of together: from global poverty to ecological crisis to the alienation that so many people feel from society.

Perhaps, like me, you’ve been praying this prayer since Wednesday night…when nine of our sisters and brothers were murdered at the Emmanuel AME church in Charleston South Carolina, attending an adult education program. The safe space of a spiritual sanctuary was violated not just by bullets but by the violent racism of a young man intent on causing harm and fear – and nine faithful people are dead because of the color of their skin. And it is not just they who have died. A small part of me has died too, in this storm – the same part of me that died when Walter Scott did. And Tamir Rice. And Freddie Gray. It’s the part of me that hopes I will live to see a time of greater racial harmony and mutual understanding.

Do you not care, God, that we are perishing? Do you not care that our collective indifference to racism and racial violence is killing us? Do you not care that we are so fearful of others, that we cannot create sensible gun ownership policies? Do you not care, God, about the pain that the deep divergences in life experience are creating in our society? Do you not care, God, that even though I am still alive, every time something like this happens it feels like a part of me is dying, that my hope is drying up, that my optimism is just naiveté?

While I find myself frequently praying versions of this prayer, and while I’m grateful for the language of prayer to speak the anger and frustration and sadness that these murders have caused within me – I’m aware that these prayers have the potential to be something of a cop out. We could so easily become like the disciples in today’s Gospel, seeking merely to outsource to God the work of navigating through the storms of our lives. You handle it God – you fix it. Sometimes I wonder if we are hoping to be delivered from evil without offering to put the entirety of our own resources into the task of cooperating with that divine intervention? Because if that’s what is going on, then we are simply using our anger with God for allowing the storm to come and our crying out to God for deliverance from it, as an excuse not to accept that we have a part to play in reaching the safe harbor for which we yearn.

When we get caught up in the emotions of our life’s storms and in our prayers assign God the task of calming them, we miss something about the truth of the Living God. It’s the same thing the disciples missed in today’s Gospel story: that Jesus is in the boat, too, with us. Jesus’ fate in the Gospel story is inextricably linked to the fate of his followers. And so, too, with our own. Our own salvation – our liberation from the alienation of contemporary life, our healing from racial injustice and bigotry of all kinds, our coming to know and love and trust God more completely – is inextricably linked to Jesus’ deepest desire, which is the salvation of the whole world. Our God is no armchair general, sending us into chaos while remaining comfortably on the shore. The incarnation is the promise that, when the weather is stormy, our confidence as people of faith is that Jesus is wading through the muck with us. That if we perish, a part of God also perishes.

At times this might tempt us to believe that our work here is simply to wake Jesus up and put him to work. But the promise of God is not passive deliverance. It is constant companionship. Unlike in the Gospel story, for us today, the Jesus’ physical presence on earth is limited to the bread and wine at the Eucharist – and through this sacred mystery, then enfleshed in our own bodies. Jesus remains our companion, but his presence on earth is now within us. So if we want to wake Jesus up…we must remember that he is sleeping in our own hearts. Jesus may be the compass to help us in the storm – but we have to pilot the boat. A compass without a pilot to use it is worthless. And a pilot without a compass will never get the boat to safety.

I leave you with the words of St. Teresa of Avila who writes,

Christ has no body but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks  
Compassion on this world,  
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,  
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.  
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,  
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.  
Christ has no body now but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks  
compassion on this world.  
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

Amen.