

12th Sunday in Ordinary Time – 2021B

Harvey. Irma. Sandy. Ike. Katrina. Andrew. Agnes.

They sound like names you would hear at a cocktail party in the 1950s, but we know them in a very different context. These are the names of some of the most devastating hurricanes in history -- storms whose impact on the lives of people continue long after the clouds have parted, the floods receded and the winds died down.

Naming storms is something that humans have been doing for a long time. In the 19th century, for example, hurricanes were often named after saints, like Hurricane Santa Ana that struck Puerto Rico in 1825. Something psychological is in play when a name is assigned to a force that threatens us. Ancient peoples often put names to forces of nature that were mysterious and destructive as a way of attempting to control or manipulate them.

The fishermen of Galilee didn't put names to the many storms that came screaming out of the Valley of the Doves on the western shore. They weren't pagans, so they didn't believe that the forces of nature were some pagan god throwing a tantrum. As Jews, they believed in the one Creator God, but they also knew that these storms were a real threat to their lives and livelihoods. While they didn't give names to them, they knew that whenever a squall blew up on the lake, it was a reminder that they were still subject to the forces of chaos, evil and death.

In fact, in much of Scripture, the sea represents calamity. The Israelites weren't really a seafaring people, so the vast Mediterranean Sea to the west, and even the smaller seas like Galilee represented the unknown -- the dark deep, the place where the terrible sea monsters waited to devour. The sea was the place from which some people never returned.

All we have to do is turn back to the first verses of Genesis to see that the sea represents chaos. When God created the heavens and the earth, "the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters" (Genesis 1:2). Darkness, wind, deep: the image of a churning storm. And yet, in the midst of the stormy chaos, God begins to separate things out, bringing light to pierce the darkness,

separating the waters and the waters from the land. The creation story is how God begins to bring order out of chaos, which becomes a metaphor for the whole biblical story: the story of how God deals with evil -- both natural and moral evil.

It's no coincidence that the first major story after creation is another boat story. Noah is a righteous man who obeys God, builds a huge boat, and prepares for God's judgment on a world where the wickedness of humanity was its own storm. God allows the chaos of the waters to break loose in a horrific flood, reverting back to the watery void of Genesis 1. And yet, while the waters rage, God saves Noah, his family and the creatures of the earth in an ark tossed by stormy seas. God's judgment, God's grace and God's rescue come together in a boat (Genesis 6-10).

Noah steps out of the ark and into a new creation washed clean by the flood. Chaos is pushed back again. Indeed, this is how God is going to deal with evil going forward: not by unleashing the chaos, but by working toward a new creation. The story of the Bible is the story of how God does that through the story of Israel -- a story that reaches its climax in Jesus.

+ It's the Exodus story of God parting the waters of the Red Sea to save Israel from the evil of slavery in Egypt.

+ It's the story of Job railing at God in the midst of evil and suffering and God showing him the great sea monsters under his control -- a sign that chaos doesn't have the last word.

+ It's the story of Isaiah looking forward to a day when all can come to the waters and drink without fear (Isaiah 55:1).

+ It's the story of Jonah tossed into the raging sea but saved in the belly of a whale (Jonah 2-3).

+ It's the story of Jesus, going through the waters of baptism and into the desert to do battle with the forces of evil (Mark 1:9-13).

The story of Scripture is the story of how God brings the people of God through the waters of evil and into a new creation.

It's no accident, then, that Mark preserves this story of Jesus and his disciples in a boat being tossed by an unexpected and violent storm. The chaos rages once again; rickety boats are swamped by huge waves and are starting to sink. Fear, panic and desperation come over these fishermen, who have clearly never experienced this type of storm (vv. 35-37).

Mark tells us that in the midst of all the chaos, Jesus is in the stern of the boat napping quietly on a cushion (v. 38). The disciples, meanwhile, are in a panic. Jesus apparently doesn't sense the chaos, the evil that surrounds them, and so they are concerned. "Wake up!" they yell over the howling wind. "Don't you see that we're dying here? Don't you care?" (v. 39 paraphrase).

Jesus wakes up, and maybe looks at them for a long moment with one eye open. He doesn't answer their question. Instead, he stands and addresses the wind and the waves. Mark says that he "rebuked" the wind and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" (v. 39). (Isn't it interesting that these are roughly the same words that Jesus uses to cast out demons? He rebukes them and tells them to be quiet. It's no coincidence that the next scene in Mark is Jesus casting out a demon on the other side of the lake [5:1-20].) Mark, as well as the other gospels, makes it clear: Jesus has command over the wind and waves, over chaos and calamity and over evil and despair.

Now we, along with Mark's readers, might expect Jesus to give his disciples an explanation of how he did that! How did he calm the storm? How did he turn a violent, raging sea into a placid pond of tranquility? We might expect a presentation outlining Jesus' humanity and divinity. But instead, Jesus turns and asks them a question: "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" (v. 40). You have to wonder if the disciples were thinking something like, "Well of course we're afraid! Jesus, on the other hand, wants them to have faith -- not fear. "Always remember, I'm in the boat with you," Jesus says in effect, "and I've got this."

The storms hit us, too, often with great fury. Many devastating hurricanes can hit our lives no matter where we live: Hurricane Cancer, Hurricane Divorce,

Hurricane Unemployment, Hurricane Financial Crisis, Hurricane Child Illness, Hurricane Covid 19.

What's your hurricane? Where is Jesus in the midst of these storms? Where is Jesus when the hurricane of devastating illness hits? Where is Jesus when the lightning strike of a loved one's death leaves us in shock? Where is God when the waves of death, destruction, and doubt threaten to sink us?

He is in the boat, with us, and there he invites us to turn from fear to faith -- the kind of faith that Jesus himself had in God, the Father who brings order out of chaos and will one day still all storms forever.

At the end of the Bible in the book of Revelation, we see a vision of the new creation made possible by Jesus' faithfulness on the cross and the triumph of his resurrection as the completion of God's plan. In chapter 21 we read about the new heavens and the new earth "coming down" and casting aside all the storms of evil from the old creation, making all things new. As John sees this vision, he notices that in this new creation "the sea was no more" (Revelation 21:1).

There's no place for evil in the new creation. No place for tears. No place for mourning or crying or pain (21:4). No more storms! What **will** be there? Hear the good news: "See, the home of God is among mortals," says a loud voice. "He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will dwell with them" (Revelation 21:3). In the new creation, the sea and all the tempestuous evil will be gone, but the God revealed in Jesus will be with us. Jesus will still be in the boat!

Many people here, in church, may be facing serious storms with memorable names. They're afraid, and rightly so. But can we put our faith in the One who lived and died by faith? We see the wind and the waves, but can we focus our eyes on Jesus, the One whom the wind and the waves ultimately obey? When the boat is tossed, we can only think of our doom. Can we instead imagine the calm and hope of a new creation?

Faith doesn't mean that we won't suffer. Jesus himself suffered and died while holding on to faith. Faith does mean, however, that we can trust him for our future -- a future made possible by his faith in God's new creation, by an empty

tomb and the defeat of death. Our baptism in water reminds us of this -- the water that was once the sign of chaos and death is now the sign of life!

Whatever storm we are facing, may we do so knowing that the One who is in the boat with us will one day retire all those named and unnamed hurricanes and memories forever.

Deacon Gerry

