

“PEACE! Be Still!” Reflection for 8th Sunday after Pentecost, 31 July 2022

Hosea 11:1-4, Psalm 107, Part One, VU #831, Philippians 4:4-9, Mark 4: 35-41

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When I chose the scripture for today, I was focussed on it being my last Sunday with you and decided to use the first two lectionary selections as being meaningful for today and chose other readings for the Epistle Reading and the gospel, for the same reason. We heard the passage in Philippians, because it is such a lovely farewell letter from the apostle Paul to the church in Philippi, which had been his first and best supporters. I will use the words from Philippians for our blessing today.

When I told Sam that “Be Still my Soul,” which he played for the Prelude today, was one of my favourite hymns, it was as much for the music as the words. The tune *Finlandia* is the tune for my University’s alma mater. But in preparing for today’s worship, I was deeply moved by how the first stanza ends: “your heavenly friend through stormy ways, leads to a peaceful end.” It’s a reference to today’s gospel story.

All the hymn choices were divine nudges that tie this service together, just as I was nudged yesterday to look again at what message there might be in today’s gospel. But worship is not about me, even on our last Sun together. It is always about God.

Please listen to: **Mark 4:35-41 Jesus Stills a Storm**

On that day, when evening had come, Jesus said to them, ‘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 gale 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?’

The disciples probably didn’t want to be out there, in that boat. It was Jesus’ idea, not theirs. “Let us go across to the other side,” he said.ⁱ

Being fisher folk, some of them could read the signs, and knew they’d probably be sailing into a storm. But sometimes, we just do what our leaders tell us to do. And later wonder why we didn’t ask more questions.

Even apart from the storm, I wonder if anyone questioned the plan itself to go “to the other side.” The other side was the country of the Gerasenes—the land on the east shore of the Sea of Galilee, a land populated mostly by Greeks and other Gentiles, relatively few Jews, and full of pagan religion and practices. They kept pigs, for goodness sake! So did anyone say, “Um, Jesus ...why do you want us to go there? Aren’t things going well enough right here in Galilee, here among our own kind? Do we really want to go out there and open ourselves to the risks?”

It's a question people asked me when I left my call at St. Paul's in Paris: Do you really want to leave the safe harbour of SPUC, where you know and love the people, to venture into interim ministry where there may be prickly challenges to be dealt with?

But that's Jesus' way, isn't it? To face storms. And to cross into unknown territory to bring the good news of God's love to all people, and share the life of God's kin-dom with all.

And I wonder, when have we done that? When have we not?

Because of what they had received from him, **all he had done for them (!)**, how could the disciples **not** go out and cross to the other side when he asked them to? Sound familiar?

There have been times we have, and have sailed right into a potential storm that could have tossed us about and almost swamped our boat. In addition to an example of which some of you may be thinking, I remember when we began our Affirming process and began open discussion about that, on Zoom and later in person, where everyone's opinion was invited. We can tell that story openly and gladly, even proudly, as a time when we tried as best we could to follow Jesus, regardless of the risk of a storm, to leave the safe harbour of where things are predictably easy. I just regret that I won't be here to celebrate when EPUC becomes an Affirming Community of Faith, because I have every confidence that is what you will choose.

When have we not been so successful in following Jesus into a storm? Some of you will think of examples.

Storms don't bother Jesus. He doesn't see them as **problems to be solved**, or things necessarily to be **avoided**. He doesn't even wake in the midst of the storm in the gospel story, until the disciples shake him and ask him to please do something about it if he cares about them at all.

Sometimes people think God's power is the power to control things and make them turn out well. At least for **us**, if God loves us.

That kind of power over the realities of life in this world is the kind of power Jesus renounced in the desert when he went there on retreat after his baptism, to grow into the true ways of God. He chose **not** to turn stones into bread just because he felt hungry. **Not** to leap from the top of the temple and expect God to keep him from falling and being hurt. **Not** to feel free to do whatever it takes—even use some of Satan's ways—to try to make the kingdoms of this world into the kingdom of God, even though the latter was his favourite topic in his preaching and teaching.

That's often what people want God to do. To control things, perhaps to bend the rules to control what happens. We're creatures of our culture, which is often about power and getting what we want. We have witnessed that in our transitional ministry.

But we are also creatures of God, with a *holy* Spirit breathed into us. And it's this—the holiness of living in God's way within the limits and realities of life on Earth—that Jesus appeals to, and seeks to nurture in his disciples.

The point of the story isn't Jesus' ability to control the weather. Rather, the miracle of the story is that Jesus demonstrated through his calmness that he lived what he taught and was not afraid of the storm. Jesus did not live in fear. He kept preaching a message that he knew could land him on a cross. And it did.

Friends, I am not Jesus, but I follow Jesus. And that is what I have tried to do, to demonstrate with calmness and integrity that I live what I teach and am not afraid of storms, even if it lands me on a cross.

Jesus had told the disciples so many times that God is close at hand, as close as their hearts. So, in our United Church "New Creed," we confess: "In life, in death, in life after death, God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God."

God was right with the disciples in their water-logged boat, experiencing with them: the storm, the waves, and the terrible danger. For Jesus, that was enough.

God's power is not found in the **control** of creation or of people, but in the willingness to be **in** covenant relationship—meaning *vulnerable* relationship, with them.

The 3-way covenant relationship of this pastoral relationship that ends today has been that kind of relationship. God's love is expressed in walking and living and sailing with us **as we are** and as we fumble around, make our way, and even sail into storms in our efforts to follow Jesus.

God's power is not seen in God's **imposing** a kingdom on the world, but in God's working together **with us** to live in the Kin-dom now. Hear the word I am saying: the feminist and First Nations interpretation of Jesus' talk about God's kingdom, taking out the "g" to make the word "Kin-dom." We have talked about it many times. The KoG is about relationship. Relationship that makes connections of compassion in the midst of hurt and sorrow. Relationship that gathers communities of justice and peace in the midst of whatever challenges may have gripped the world in our day. Relationship to live out wellness and courage even in the midst of brokenness, and to offer ourselves—and call forth from others—self-giving love even in the most scary of times.

The Kin-dom of God was Jesus' favourite topic, the one he preached and taught about more than any other. And he said it is within us. Now. Waiting to be lived out and to be

lived into. And now, at the end of this covenanted relationship, Stephen and I will continue to do that, but we will be doing that in a different place.

Do you remember the closing scene of actor Matt Smith's run as The Doctor? He was the Eleventh Doctor and in this final scene his time is coming to an end. He knows this because the process of regenerating has already started.

Amelia Pond, one of his companions, is sad to see him go, saying, "But you're the Doctor." He responds, "Yep. And I always will be. But times change and so must I. We all change when you think about it, we're all different people, all through our lives, and that's okay, that's good... so long as you remember all the people that you used to be."

And then he says, "I will not forget one line of this, not one day, I swear. I will always remember when The Doctor was me." My dear friends, I will always remember when The Minister was me. Thank you for filling my time here with so many wonderful memories!ⁱⁱ

Jan Richardson, an artist and theologian, wrote a poem titled "Blessing in the Storm."

I cannot claim
to still the storm
that has seized you,
cannot calm
the waves that wash
through your soul,
that break against
your fierce and
aching heart.

But I will wade
into these waters,
will stand with you
in this storm,
will say peace to you
in the waves,
peace to you
in the winds,
peace to you
in every moment
that finds you still
within the storm.

Even though I will no longer be doing that as your minister, please know that I will be holding you in my heart and in my prayers, as your friend.

ⁱ Some of the exposition on the storm is adapted from a sermon posted by Brian Donst, posted on *Midrash* on 23 June 2018.

ⁱⁱ From Sue Evany's farewell sermon last week to the CoF with which she was serving, posted on FB 24 July 2022.