

**Sermon: Second Miracle      Text – Mark 4:35-41      March 22, 2020****Rev. Steve Clifton Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa**

A member of our congregation, Bas Groeneweg tells a story. Bas was a long time lay preacher and one Sunday he and his wife Helen went off to a small country church to lead the Sunday service. Bas would preach and Helen played the organ. When they got to the church there were only two other people there, sitting close together in the very back pew in an otherwise empty church. And when Bas spoke to them they explained that they had to be there. It was their turn to take up the offering.

That story came to mind as we prepared to lead worship this morning. We have 3 ministers, maintaining social distance. And Brian and Doreen are up in the balcony working sound and slides and making the webcast work. And we have an empty sanctuary.

At Rideau Park, for maybe 15 years, we have observed the season of Lent by cancelling meetings in order to create space for study and prayer, making time and space for God. This Lent we may have gone too far- we have canceled everything.

But cancelling everything is a spiritual act. We worship today at distance from one another out of love for each other, out of concern for the wider community. Social distancing is itself a giving act. It's a good Lenten practice, to keep apart for the sake of each other in this strange time.

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This Lent, before things shut down, we were running a series on Wednesday nights, each evening looking at a different way to pray or to exercise our spirits.

Two weeks ago we looked at Scripture Meditation, Praying with Scripture. We practiced the Ignatian way of prayer together, a prayer of the imagination.

In this style of prayer, you read the text through once, and then again paying attention to details that draw you in, and then on the third reading you enter the story. You use your imagination to plunge into the text and to be close to Jesus, to be in the scene with him for a time. You can watch as an observer. You can step in and be a person in the story. And when we met a few weeks ago the Gospel we shared today was one that we prayed through in this way.

Jesus and his friends are on the water, sailing the familiar waters of the Sea of Galilee. The shape of the sea, the mountains and hills that surround it, the Golan Heights that tower above its shores, all of this create a condition where storms may rise up suddenly and violently. And to be on the water in a big storm was a very dangerous thing.

The disciples are afraid. It's not an irrational fear. Jesus friends included fishermen who had lived their lives on these waters, following their fathers and grandfathers before them. This would not have been their first storm. So they knew the danger and in this storm they were afraid.

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We can put ourselves into this story. Living in our current time and place maybe we know what it is like to be anxious or worried or fearful like the disciples on the sea. And that's not a sign of weakness; it's not irrational to be anxious or sad or worn down. We may have concern for our health, or the health of loved ones. We may worry about the financial implications of the pandemic for us or those we love. We may feel lonely or isolated. We may have had comfortable routines disrupted. We may be thinking of family and friends far away. We may have had to cancel much anticipated events...a trip or a wedding ...and it's a loss that we understandably grieve.

So if we enter into the gospel for today we can readily connect to the friends of Jesus, worried as they are, battered by forces so much bigger than they are. They are experienced sailors no doubt doing what they can in the storm, but it's such a big storm that they feel overwhelmed.

And then comes the miracle... Jesus stands and calls out peace be still.

And the waves and winds obey him.

All becomes still and calm.

The disciples are amazed for in their tradition, only God can control wind and rain, storm and sea. Who is this Jesus that wind and waves obey him?

It makes me think of the Anne Murray song that was hit in the 70s. *Put your hand in the hand of the man who stills the water. Put your hand in the hand of the man who calms these sea.*

In the storm we now face together, putting our hand in Jesus hand is a good thing to do...

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The big miracle of this gospel story shared today is Jesus calming the sea and stilling the storm.

But when we prayed through this text together a few Wednesday nights ago, another miracle came into view. The storm rages, the winds blow. The disciples are bailing water, pulling ropes, hauling on the rudder. And Jesus sleeps. Their boat is in peril and Jesus peacefully naps through it all.

Isn't it a miracle that Jesus stays so calm and unaffected in the midst of what others find terrifying?

I was thinking about Jesus embodying a calm in the midst of storm and danger and I was drawn to another story.

We are all of us dutifully practicing social distancing or self-isolation, doing what we can for each other in an unprecedented time.

In our tradition there was a woman who was the supreme self-isolator: a mystic, a woman of prayer, a holy person who might help us in our time.

She lived in England in the 14th Century and she was an anchoress. This means that she devoted herself to a life of prayer in just one place. She chose to be literally isolated from the world, chose to be sealed into a room in her local church. Julian of Norwich had a window to the world

so that she could pray with visitors, speak to those outside and get what she needed to live from the world.

And in her time spent in her cell, England knew plague and several famines caused by crop failures, and a civil war raged. And yet she wrote her most famous words even with all that bad news swirling around her. She wrote: "All shall be well/ and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well."

Dame Julian had a mystical encounter with the Holy, a vision of all creation resting safely in the palm of God's hand. And in a moment of profound insight she knew that three things were true. "The first is that God made it. The second is that God loves it. And the third, is that God keeps it."

And then in her self isolation she saw the goodness of God, like a vast expanse of virgin snow, pure and white and unending. On the white expanse there was a tiny grain of darkness. Almost too small to notice. All the ills and evils of the world were like a tiny speck beside a cosmic field of pure radiant love and goodness. And so in spite of the troubles of her times, in her isolation, she could say: "All shall be well and all shall I be well and all manner of things shall be well."

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Jesus sleeps in the midst of a storm. He knows the love and faithfulness and goodness of God in the most intimate way. He knows how great and wide and towering and deep is the love of God. He knows that God has all of us in the palm of God's hand. So he has a peace in the midst of storm and wind.

The storm rages and Jesus followers are anxious. But look to Jesus and see him showing peace and calmness in the midst of it all. Look to Jesus, who stills the storm that rages. And the while the storm rages, trust that a time of calm and peace and relief and joy will come.

May the peace of Christ be with us, abide in us, inspire us.

The peace of Christ be with you my friends. Now and always.

Amen