

signs and storms

John 6: 1-21

The Sixteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B

July 26, 2015

We are back into John's gospel after a while of hanging out with Mark. I say "back" because we did get to spend some quality time in John's narrative in Lent and Easter. And now rather than jumping around through John's story of Jesus, we'll immerse ourselves for five weeks in just this one chapter. This chapter talks a lot about bread, and I want to invite you to join me in focusing on the sacraments, on baptism and communion, as we hear from John over these next five weeks.

This entire chapter of John, all 71 verses, offers a much deeper look into who Jesus is. For John, there was never any dispute about Jesus' divinity, we know from the very beginning that the word was with God and the word was God, and that he was in the beginning with God. In John 6 we get a deeper understanding of who God is in Jesus Christ, people are recognizing Jesus for who he is, for he is God. He's not just a prophet, he's "I am."

Remember when God first called Moses? Moses asks God, when they ask me who sent me, who should I say. God answers "I am who I am, thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you (Ex. 3:14). That's the same language Jesus uses when he identifies himself to his disciples in the midst of the storm. Clearly this prophet is the one who has come into the world, as the people say about him.

This is one of many feeding stories in the gospels. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all include a story of feeding of 5,000; Mark even has two. But John emphasizes something different than the rest. Most of the feeding stories end with "and all ate and were filled." Which is awesome, amazing. Definitely a miracle.

But John goes on to say that "When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.'" In the other gospels, the story moves along, there is no interpretation of what feeding 5,000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish could mean... the writers move along, but John, written the latest and so furthest removed from the actual events of Jesus' life, takes a moment to record what the people were thinking, what they were saying after that incredible event.

Jesus takes the bread, gives thanks, breaks the bread and hands it out. As he does that it becomes more than just bread, it becomes something that nourishes a crowd who is hungry for food and hungry for the living word of the ultimate prophet.

The realness of communion, the incarnation of Jesus alive in the bread for John is certainly present at the last supper, at Jesus' death, but even more so its present in the middle of his life.

Just as it does at the last supper, in a field, a small amount of bread becomes abundant grace for all of us.

And so the crowd whispers among themselves, saying, this really is it. He's the one, the one that they are all saying he is. They know that it's a sign that God is at work in the world.

John talks a lot about "signs" in his Gospel. That's the word he uses to describe the miracles that Jesus is doing. The things that Jesus does in John's gospel, heal the blind, bring Lazarus back from the dead, turn water into wine... those things are incredible. But still, even when there are great signs, there are also great storms. Like we hear about in our passage for today.

Signs and storms come together. In fact, signs, especially ones like we hear about today, are few and far between, I think it's the storms that are a lot more common.

I spent the week before last with 20 youth and adults Saint Mark Chevy Chase PC at the Montreat Youth Conference in Montreat, NC.

The theme for this summer's conferences is "This is Our Story" and we talked about how our stories are unique, messy and are all intertwined, with one another and with God's story.

While we were at Montreat, we had some hard conversations about signs- how can we possibly know that God is at work in the world? And what does that even mean? What looks like a sign to one person can look totally different to someone else.

On the last couple of days in Montreat we explored how God is present in our story, our story that's still being written, and several youth got up and shared how they experienced God as present in their story. But others struggled with that. What does it mean for one person to see and feel and hear God in a very real way, when another person cannot? Does that make one person more or less Christian?

These incredible brave souls who stood up and shared their stories of heartbreak, bullying, self-harm, eating disorders and homelessness all found God in the midst of tragic circumstances. It was inspiring, tear-jerking, amazing and I cannot use the word "brave" enough to describe these young people. So. Brave.

But I couldn't help but wonder, what about those people who are in the midst of a messy story, a family crisis, a health problem, depression, a million other things I could list, what about those people sitting in the congregation who are having trouble finding God in the midst of their mess?

Who can't see the signs, who cannot sense that God is present, or who are, dare I say it, in a place where there is no hope, no light, no God.

We have before us today this incredible miracle, a sign of the God who is present on earth in God's Son, Jesus Christ, a sign of hope, and fullness and inclusion. And yet, listen to what comes next.

Re-read 6: 15-21.

"When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going."

When I think of darkness, rough times and terror, today I can't help but think of a dark movie theater in Lafayette, Louisiana where a man opened fire while people were enjoying a romantic comedy on Thursday night. Two people were killed and nine more injured when John Russell Houser walked into the theater with a gun and the intent to kill. Lafayette, which the New York Times says boasts of being the happiest city in the country, joined Chattanooga, Tennessee; Charleston, South Carolina; Aurora, Colorado; Newtown, Connecticut, and so many others on the long list of cities scarred by gun violence. Is this something that is just normal in our country now? Is there a place in a community that has not been ripped apart by gun violence? A movie theater, a church, a military recruiting center, an elementary school?! Is that acceptable? How have we let it get this far?

Where is the hope? Where is God? How do the people who are worshipping in Lafayette right now see God in the midst of the storm that is encompassing their town? I'm honestly not sure.

The wind becomes rough, the waves are high, the boat starts to rock and the disciples are afraid. After this incredible miracle, this sign, still the disciples fear, still the storm rocks them to their core, so much so that they don't even recognize their leader, Jesus. Signs of amazing grace and storms of great terror are not mutually exclusive. It's not like you have one or the other. Signs and storms go together, they weave in and out of the same story seamlessly, sometimes we don't even recognize the difference between the two. Frederick Buechner once said, "Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Do not be afraid."

Sometimes God is distinctly present in the storm, the way the disciples realized that it was Jesus who was walking toward them in the boat, saying "It is I, do not be afraid;" and sometimes, when tragedy and heartbreak are so heavy we feel as though we cannot bear them any longer, we sit down and cry out, like the Psalmist does, "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

And that's ok. Because life is not about signs OR storms. It's not about presence OR absence, or joy OR heartbreak. Life is signs and storms, presence and absence, joy and heartbreak, all holding hands and traveling the path with us.

And I think that is part of the beauty of the church's sacramental practice. We don't have to be whole to experience God's presence at the table. We don't have to have it all together to receive the promises of forgiveness at the font.

And so, I want to invite you to come here to worship, this week, and always, as yourself. Really.

This seems so simple, I know, and yet in so many parts of our lives we feel like we must pretend, put on a good face, not let others in. We hold vulnerability and honesty at bay, lest we drown in the fear of rejection and shame.

So come to worship today as a baby comes to the font, holding nothing back and risking it all, for it is our Lord himself who invites us to share in the holy meal, who nourishes us with his own body, who calls us to new life and hope, now and forever. We are invited to come as we are, to remind us that while we are not in control, and that we are loved for who we are.

If we come to worship like that, and I hope we do, perhaps it will help us come to life like that, every day. Because Jesus didn't say "come to me, all you who are perfect and who have no grief or despair. Come to me you who have it all figured out." No, he said, "come to me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

There were no perfect people gathered there with Jesus on that day. There were no people devoid of sin, who had never experienced grief, who had never questioned God... they were human, just like you and I. They were fed, just like you and I.

We are fed with hope when we are empty. We are fed with joy when we are filled with despair. We are called forward to the table when we are not sure we can get up and walk. We are met by Jesus in the midst of a storm. He said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid."

Thanks be to God. Amen.