

SURVIVING THE CALM
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About ten years ago, one of my very best friends had a baby. I will call her Elizabeth.

Having a baby was harder than Elizabeth thought it would be. The baby cried. A lot. Elizabeth cried. A lot.

When I finally had a chance to visit her, I ordered my dear friend straight to bed, took over the childcare, and held her son in my arms. It was time to calm the storm.

Three hours later *I* was crying! The baby was crying. Elizabeth was crying. Every prayer I ever knew escaped me. I will not repeat the words that took their place!

But songs I learned in Sunday School came flooding back. The lullabies most of all. I started singing (in my “those who can’t sing, preach, alto?) “Peace ... peace ... be still ... peace ... be still ...”

I did not care how badly I sang off tune. I just sang with all my might to that crying baby. And to that crying baby’s crying mother. And yes, to my own crying self.

The response was not immediate. It took a lot longer than I thought it should. But finally, eventually, the wailing ceased. The hiccups turned to sighs. The baby became a lump in my arms. And I collapsed, exhausted, onto the couch. And my friend finally got some sleep. And so did the baby. And so did I.

I am guessing most of us could tell a version of that story—from ten years ago or from ten minutes ago—about coming to our wits end in the swirling chaos that just will not quit, not even for a second, and holding on to whatever gift of grace God gives us in the moment. Crying out for peace. Singing out for peace.

The thing about the winds and the waves is that they have been with us from the beginning of time. From those very first verses in Genesis, when God was beginning to create the heavens and the earth, and the New Revised Standard Version translation says, “a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.”

[*ve·ru·ach e·lo·him me·ra·che·fet al·pe·nei ham·ma·yim*]

Of course the Newquist Interpretive Version from the Hebrew, coming from a woman named “Gusti,” would translate this as the Spirit of God, the breath of God, the wind of God, literally swooping and swirling and maybe even storming over the waters of primordial chaos.

From the very beginning.

Which means that the Spirit of God has not just been *calming* the storm from the beginning, but that the Spirit of God has also been *in* the storm from the beginning. That the Spirit of God may even be *using* the storm, “troubling the water” as the old spiritual says, with “Good Trouble,” as the former Civil Rights hero and Congressman John Lewis says, to name the evil that surrounds us: of white supremacy, of economic exploitation, of the widening gulf between “the haves” and “the have nots.”

If this is true, if the Spirit of God really is using the storm to shake us up, the question becomes, why would we want God to “calm the storm,” when it is the storm itself that forces us to face that evil? To name it? To resist it? As we say in our baptismal vows, to *renounce* it?

It is possible the point of this story is not to calm the storm at all.

The disciples are, after all, rowing “against the wind.” What if, instead of ending the storm when he gets in the boat with Peter, Jesus is teaching us to “lean into” the wind? To rock the boat IN SOLIDARITY with the wind. To *work* with the wind, and the lessons it has to teach us, with our focus always on the Beloved Community, the Great Shalom, the Peaceable Kingdom Jesus has just spent the entire day proclaiming?

Maybe the Spirited wind of God in these chaotic times can instead be interpreted as an uncharted gift of God’s presence and grace and ultimate healing, if it leads us to know deep in our soul that *God is still with us*, in good times and in bad, through the swooping and swirling Spirit that forces us to confront the evil that rages around us. To confront our deepest fears of giving in to the terror and the violence that comes with us. To rekindle our strongest hopes in the peace of Christ within it that passes all understanding, guiding us ever onward to God’s glorious reign of peace.

In either case, the good news is this: no matter what kind of storm this is, one to be calmed or one to be co-opted, the everlasting arms of our mothering/fathering/or even best-friend-stepping-in-to-help-out God really will do whatever it takes to calm us in our chaos, to give us respite from the really hard work of resisting evil and re-focusing on the reign of God.

Because even God knows what it is to need a break, a rest, in the middle of the storm.

Which is, of course, what Jesus is doing in our Scripture in the first place, at the end of a really long day that began with news of the be-heading of John the Baptist and turned into a morning of mass healing and an afternoon of feasting on five loaves and two fish with more than five thousand of his friends.

What Jesus is doing in our Scripture in the first place is taking a break. Because he needs one.

And, maybe, so do we.

The truth is, this COVID-enforced slowdown has given at least some of us at SPC the chance to regroup, to re-charge, to re-set our ministry of Radical Hospitality, Holistic Spirituality, and Engaged Compassion in light of the evil that swirls around us. And we have already found a way to carry that message to so many more people because of the gifts of technology.

The truth is, this COVID-enforced slowdown has given at least some of us the chance to strengthen our communication strategies and Deacon Shepherd ministry, to highlight our need to develop a much more robust ministry with our children, to re-double our collaboration with the local NAACP: in this case, to ensure masks are available to everyone in the African American community.

The COVID-enforced slowdown has even given birth to “The SPC Serenade Squad,” our own Pied Piper and her merry band of singers traveling to homes of isolated parishioners, singing them through the storm, masked and socially distanced, of course.

They are, on our behalf, literally *making peace so* by their singing. And those who receive their gift are literally *making peace so* as they cry out, “Lord, save me,” for companionship.

Dear friends, in our singing and our crying out, in the midst of a storm that really is teaching us so much, the good news is we may finally find ourselves relaxing just enough to know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that we really are leaning on *everlasting* arms. Arms of justice and peace. And those arms will not ever let us go.

Amen.