

The Rev. Seth Dietrich
August 13, 2023 - 11th Sunday after Pentecost

Prayer for the Storm(s)

What is the worst storm you've ever been in?

On the 4th of July, 1999, Maggie and I were canoeing up in the Boundary Waters way up in northern Minnesota not far from where we were on vacation 2 weeks ago. We had been in the wilderness for 4 days, and each day had grown successively hotter, the 3rd of July reaching 100 degrees according to our little thermometer. We had no access to technology, no radio signal, there were no weather apps back then. Perhaps if we had been paying attention we would have known something was not right.

It was around noon. We were on this enormous lake and the lake was so still you could see the water striders pushing through the surface making those almost imperceptible rings. We began to hear, way off in the distance, these long rumbles of thunder. Over the next half-hour the thunder grew closer and the sky grew darker, so that eventually we pulled the canoe up on shore, walked inland to find the biggest sheltering tree we could find, pulled out our raincoats, and prepared to get wet.

The wind picked up. And then picked up some more. When it started to rain, the wind caught it, so that it was flying horizontally. And then all of the sudden there was this sound in the distance. Like a shotgun going off. And then another one closer and then another even closer. I turned into the rain and opened my eyes just wide and long enough to see a thick white pine, 30 feet tall, probably 2 feet around, crack in half, just right in the middle of the trunk. I thought, "Oh, that's not good." And so by instinct, we started running out from under that tree and back to the clearing where we pulled up. There were trees coming down not far from us, as we were running. The lake was now this black, boiling cauldron. The canoe had been blown 20 feet into a thicket of smaller trees and was just bouncing up and down. And we just stayed there, kneeling, braced, waiting for it to pass. Maybe 30 seconds? A minute? And then it was gone.

Over the course of the next 2 days, as we made our way out through these portages now choked with trees, we saw countless float-planes flying back and forth overhead. And when we finally got back into the town of Ely, we would find out that no one had been killed, but 27 had been injured, a few people severely. The damage had been done by "straight-line winds," also called *derecho* from the Spanish for straight. They're very rare. 100 mph, blew down 500,000 trees. That first night back, we got a really nice hotel, but it would be days before we felt much of a sense of calm.

In this gospel story from Matthew, there is a storm that sweeps down on Jesus and the disciples when they are out on the Sea of Galilee. The lake was known for producing big storms out of nowhere, and this has already happened once in Matthew's gospel, when Jesus was actually with the disciples in the boat, asleep, and they panic-shooked him awake to do something.

The dramatic core of today's familiar story is Jesus coming to them on the water in the midst of the storm. At first they mistake him for a ghost. Peter goes rogue out and steps out of the boat and begins to sink; Jesus pulls him up and then Jesus once again calms the winds and the waves. We rightly think of the miracle of the story as Jesus walking on the water, a profound display of power and authority. The sea was such a universal symbol of chaos and destruction, and here is Jesus transcending the sea, trampling the sea, a foretaste of him trampling death in the resurrection.

But there is another smaller miracle buried in this story. Maybe not supernatural but very much not-natural. We know at this point in his life, Jesus was beyond swamped with demands, underwater with opportunities to preach and teach and heal. Yet, in the midst of all those demands we read this one almost throw-away line in the story: "And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray."

Jesus pauses to pray, to be with the Father, the God who has every hair counted, who pays attention when even the smallest sparrow falls. Jesus routinely paused to pray, and from the wellspring of that prayer he radiated a peace so profound that only language like calming a raging storm could begin to capture it. From the depth of that prayer he healed the sick and cast out evil; from that prayer he could steadily move towards the cross, where the sun would go dark at noonday, the eye of the storm where he would redeem humanity.

I hear from so many people who wish they prayed more. People who want to pray but think they do not have enough faith, who feel they can not screw themselves into the right frame of mind, so that prayer soon breaks down into a kind of funhouse hall of mirrors as they ask themselves, "What am I doing? Who am I praying to? Does this make a difference? How?" The kind of interior monologue that feels like a dog chasing its tail around and around and around.

So many of us long for a deeper peace amidst the internal turmoil that rises up within us. Because for most of us the biggest storms we face do not happen out on a lake. The biggest storms we face come from within. The raging winds and waters of our own minds. These big inner storms can create all kinds of damage, verbal lightning striking and singeing those around us. There have been times when I am the *derecho*, when my insecure little ego is so wrapped in fear and that fear is so uncomfortable, so unacceptable, that I would rather crack a thousand trees in half than simply acknowledge, "I'm scared."

Pausing to pray can take so many different forms. Lately, I have been meditating on the quote about prayer from the great 20th century French theologian and philosopher, Simone Weil. Spelled WEIL. Provocatively, Weil, said, “Attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer. [Attention] presupposes faith and love....Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity...Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer.” The reason absolutely unmixed attention is a form of prayer is because it releases us from that mental hall of mirrors; it places our attention on something real and true. God is the ground of Reality so being in the presence of the real, necessarily brings us closer to God’s presence.

Here are 2 ways I will pray with unmixed attention. On the one hand, I’ll give myself over to the sensory details of the *external* world. If I am outside, I’ll say “For the next 10 minutes I am going to pay attention to the details of the tree, bush and wrought iron table right in front of me, as if I have never seen these things before. I will say something like, “Lord, I give myself over to the wonder of this world.” And then trace the lines of the tree, the shape and spacing of the leaves, the particulars, as if you were going to be asked to draw it later that day.

I will also pray with unmixed attention to what is happening *internally*, especially if there are winds and waves, and this means paying attention to my body. The body is like the tether to what is real in the midst of the storm. In a great emotional storm, I can try to turn my unmixed attention to where I feel tension and unease: what are the sensations in my forehead, in my stomach, in my jaw, in my shoulders. This pausing to feel something real sometimes anchors me and then lets all the anxiety, the fear, let’s all the PROBLEMS THAT HAS TO BE FIXED RIGHT NOW, rumble and flash, but then just roll on like it always does.

This week, how will you pause to pray? How will you find some small ways to generously give unmixed attention to sensations in the body, and unmixed attention to something in the real physical world, not images on Instagram or words on your news app, but unmixed attention to life in God’s sensory, physical world, the wonderful place where at one time, not long ago, we all used to live.