

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. *Amen.*

In my humble opinion, there is nothing better on a hot, sticky summer afternoon than a roaring good storm. Despite the influence of my grandmother who was absolutely terrified of storms, I've come to love the smell of rain in the air, the change in barometric pressure, the thunder and lightning, the wind blowing through the leaves on the trees, and, of course, the drop in temperature that usually accompanies these afternoon weather episodes. I could stand and watch a storm for hours. Afterward, for a time at least, it seems as if the air has been cleared and we can breathe once again—at least until the temperature climbs back to where it started and the humidity with it.

Now, my animals do not like these storms. In fact, I can tell when there's a storm coming even before I hear the rumble of thunder, because both the dog and the cat suddenly want to be as close to me as they can get. I suppose I'm the alpha animal in our house, but it always amazes me that their instinct is to seek protection from me. I've never done anything more than speak calmly to them, or rub their backs and pat their heads, but apparently that is all they need from me: the reassurance that I will be with them until the storm passes. Once the storm is over, we're back to normal.

In Mark's Gospel today, we hear of such a storm. Jesus has just finished teaching the crowds many parables. At the beginning of Chapter 4, we learn that the crowd was so large he actually got into a boat to teach them those things they couldn't understand. Afterward, he explained everything to his disciples privately. And when evening came, Jesus and the disciples, and other boats with them, left the shore to go to the other side. In the next chapter, we learn that "the other side" is the country of the Gerasenes, Gentiles who will learn about Jesus' power through his healing miracles, and that his first encounter there will be with a raging, howling demoniac who greets him as soon as he steps out of the boat.

On the "sea," which is really a large but shallow lake, Jesus is in the middle, between the large crowd that followed him and pressed him into the boat and the unknown that awaited him on the other side. He was tired, obviously, asleep on the cushion in the stern, sleeping so soundly that he was not disturbed by the storm that sent the disciples into panic mode. "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" He awoke and quieted the storm, then 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 sea obey him?"

Who indeed, we might ask? And where is he now? Is he sleeping on a cushion in the stern of the boat? Why aren't we screaming at him to wake up, to help us as the storm rages around us? Are we *not* afraid? Maybe we think that if we just ignore it, just hunker down in the bottom of the boat, the storm will move past us and we'll be safe. At least until the next time. And there *will* be a next time. Surely there is no one here today who is unaware of the horrible massacre that took place at Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston this past Wednesday evening. Yesterday our Bishop published the following letter to members of the Episcopal Church in our Diocese:

"Dear People of Western North Carolina," he writes. "It is with great sadness that I write you as your bishop to call us to prayer. On Wednesday night of this week nine fellow pilgrims on the Way were murdered in Charleston, SC. Racism has infected our country since the sin of slavery. However, we forget how embedded and sinister that infection is until an incident like this one. Twenty-one-year-old Dylan Roof shot men and women in church simply because of the color of their skin. Our country is complicit because of the lack of the political will to take any effective action

against the sea of guns and because our commitment for effective action against racism is not sustained.”

The Bishop continues, “As Christians, we are called to be agents of peace. We are called to hold on to the vision of the New Jerusalem where all God's children live in harmony, and there are no shootings of African Americans or anyone else. This Sunday and every day, I ask you to pray for the deep peace of God to come upon our nation and take away our sin of racism and our blindness to the evil of so many weapons in this country.”

In a moment, we'll pray together as Bishop Taylor has asked us to pray. But first, I ask that you consider where we are today, as followers of Christ, and as the church that gathers us together. What do we stand for? How do we express our beliefs and convictions to the world around us? We seem to be in the middle, much like Jesus was, not coincidentally gathered together in the nave of this church that architecturally resembles an upside down boat. We are between two shores on the shallow lake of our culture, a culture that has no depth, no sense of the common good, no sense of the value of God's creation and God's created, no sense that anything matters beyond what affects us personally and individually, until storms and high waves remind us from time to time that the world around us is in the middle of a raging storm. We must choose which side of the lake we want to go to. Will it be the side where we crowd together in the safety and comfort of our own wants and needs? Or the other side, where there are risks, but also rewards?

What I find hard to understand is why we are not waking up our sleeping savior, asking for his help. Could it be that we know he will call on us to become actively involved in the resolution of the problems that plague our world, to share our stories of faith, to tell people *why* we are followers of Christ, *why* we attend church on Sundays, *why* we want our children to know Jesus, *why* we believe in God the Father, God, the Son, and God the Holy Spirit? Perhaps his question, “Why are you afraid?” is not about the storm, but about our own fears and doubts. His question is meant for us, for you, and for me. May God give us the courage to answer it.

Bishop Taylor has called upon us to use the prayer “For the Human Family” in our Book of Common Prayer. I ask that you add it to your personal prayers each day. Let's begin now by praying it together. You'll find it on page 815 in your Prayer book. Page 815, a prayer “For the Human Family.” Let us pray.

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.