

Saint Johns Episcopal Church
The Reverend Audrey J. Murdock

June 21, 2009

The Third Sunday after Pentecost

Readings:

Job 38: 1-11, Psalm 107

2 Corinthians 6 1-13

Mark 4: 35-41

Our forbears in Israel were scared of water - not of gently running water in rivers and streams, or of water bubbling up in springs. Such water was welcome - life giving in an arid world; but they were frightened by water out of control - a flash flood sweeping down a creek bed that moment before had been dry. In particular, they were afraid of anything they called the sea.

This shouldn't be surprising ; they were a nomadic people who had wandered in from the deserts. To come up against the Sea of Galilee or the Mediterranean was frightening; even on a calm day, the pounding of the waves was threatening. When a storm raged, the water became dangerous. Water out of control represented chaos and that I think stands today ~ remember that awful tsunami a couple of years ago and the havoc and loss of life that created.

Before "in the beginning", there as nothing but chaos, ultimate disorder. The Hebrew creation account speaks of the void, darkness, the deep - a sort of formless pre-ocean everywhere - actually called "tohu we bohu", a term for sinister confusions, almost wickedness, derived from the Hebrew name for one of the deities of the anaric underworld, Tiamat of Babylonian mythology.

And in the beginning, God spoke and order descended upon chaos. Water was separated from dry land. The water was contained. As God reminds Job, "I shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb...I made the clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band, and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors and said, "Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped." The miracle of creation was understood as the bringing of order, allowing dry land, a secure place for life to begin.

Placed in order it may have been, but the sea always remained a threat. A portion of Psalm 107 portrays the enormity of the danger. It is often read to commemorate the bravery of seafarers at funerals of mariners and sailors. The psalm depicts seafaring merchants sailing up and down the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea between Lebanon, Israel and Egypt. While they were at sea, the Lord spoke and reversed the word spoken "in the beginning" and a storm arose. Once gentle waves tossed high. Bouncing atop them was the boat, its inhabitants thrown heavenward and then plunged back into the depths - into tohu we bobu, into chaos. Their hearts melted says the psalm, because of their peril. They found the courage to cry out to the Lord and God delivered them. The storm was stilled; the waves were quieted. They reached a safe harbor, were glad and they gave thanks.

Thanksgiving for rescue. There is no comment on the fact that the Lord spoke the storm into being, that God's breath drove the storm. Rather, there is the suggestion that those sailors should never have left the harbor in the first place. What were they doing out there on the deep? Phoenicians went sailing, Philistines went sailing, Greeks went sailing, but not Hebrews! Every good Hebrew knew that the water would get you. They were supposed to stay on land. In any event, their relief at rescue is so great

because the fear of chaos and destruction is so great that they thank God even for causing the storm to get them off of the deep where Israel does not belong.

The gospel story from Mark echoes these primal fears of our people. Jesus and the disciples are on the deep, the Sea of Galilee. There is a storm. Jesus is asleep on a cushion. You might recall the story of Jonah. He too was asleep when a storm struck, a storm sent by God to pursue him while he was running away from the tasks God had set. In that story, the crew awakens Jonah, accosts him, and demands that he pray to his God for deliverance. Eventually they cast lots to see who is the cause of the evil. The lot falls on Jonah, who is then cast, like a placating sacrifice into *tohu we bohu*, where he was consumed by a great fish, understood always as the Leviathan, the denizen of the deep, the inhabitant of chaos

Echoing the Jonah narrative, the disciples awaken the sleeping Jesus with a panicked rebuke, "Don't you care that we are perishing?" And then Jesus does what no human could expect. He speaks to the storm. He rebukes the wind and says to the sea, "Shalom, Peace! Be still!" And there was a great calm. He speaks, just like the Lord God in the beginning and order is restored, recreated.

Most of us don't have to find ourselves caught in a storm on the deep sea in order to know the fear of chaos that grips the sailors in the psalm, or the disciples with Jesus - although I have personally been caught in two bad storms on the sea, and have known that fear of chaos! But most of us have experienced the taste of chaos well enough - when everything seems to be spinning out of control; the loss of health, employment, loss of control over our emotional life. We know chaos in our community and in the church when we are faced with the prospect of radical change - new choices. We know chaos in our families when faced with the death of a beloved, or the death of the relationship at the center of the family. We know chaos in our nation where we recognize poverty that goes unchecked. We see it in the epidemic of violence under the forms of murder, execution and war.

It can be *tohu we bohu* in its most sinister form. And the effect of that is to bring isolation. People caught in the maelstrom lose their connection. People are drowning alone, separated and isolated from each other.

And yes, we cry out to the Lord in our trouble. But where is this Lord? Where is Jesus when we need him to speak shalom, to bring order? The disciples that day only had to wake him up for he was with them all along.

And so it is with us. God is with us all along. In all the stories of chaos, God is an intimate player. God is with the sailors on the deep, Jesus is with the disciples in their fear filled boat. God is with us in our chaos, for God does not abandon us to *tohu we bohu*.

However I don't know about you all, but sometimes there are times when I want to be able to reach out like the disciples were able to, to wake Jesus up to keep me company, to still the raging storm I find myself in. I want Jesus to come and rescue us from all the creeping power of *tohu we bohu*, the anarchy of chaos. I want to be able to touch him, to ask him with the disciples, "Don't you care that we are perishing?"

Well we can. Look around you. We have seen Christ keeping us company in the disorder of life. We together, as a community and as a church, have already passed through the frightening *tohu we bohu* of the deep. We have gone down into the deep to face death in baptism and like the sailors we have been raised heavenward. And in the rising we have been remade in Christ Jesus. We are his body, given to each other in order to make him known as we keep one another company, as we touch each

other with his healing touch, as we love each other with his self-giving love, as we speak the truth in his name, as we make peace with one another, as we learn to trust each other with the knowledge of the secrets of our various forms of chaos and fear. As we act as the body of Christ, then we can see that he is indeed present. We can touch him in one another and we, with him, can face down disorder - have faced down disorder, and make a difference in the world he created; we can speak peace in the world he has re-created.

Oh, yes, there are times when we lose sight of all of this. Times when we lose sight of Christ in our midst, see only the old disorder, and get sucked back into fear and isolation. There is another story about a storm on the water when Jesus calls Peter to walk to him on the waves. Peter is fine just so long as he keeps his eyes firmly fixed on Christ. But then he wavers, perhaps looks away, perhaps looking down at tohu we bohu alive in the tossing waves under his feet, he is filled with fear and starts to sink. "Lord save me!" he cries out. And so the Lord does.

So it is with us. When we find we have wandered away from the body of Christ, when we are sucked back into the old disorders, most often seen first in our own behaviour when we don't treat each other like Christ, when we insist on putting our own feelings, desires, prejudices, our own selves first, when we falter in trust, and in loving, when we feel ourselves alone under the power of the storm, our lives in disorder - like Peter gulping water, or the disciples, or those sailors, when we are already sinking and tohu we bohu has wrapped its tentacles around our ankles and is pulling us down into chaos once again.

All we need to do, indeed, actually all we can do, is to cry out "Lord save me!" And then trust Jesus to reach out and save us - through the loving hands of the community of faith in whose presence we know our Lord to be.

Amen