

Sermon on Mark 4:35-41  
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, June 21, 2015  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
By James Erlandson

*“God Is Our Refuge and Strength”*

Once upon a time, I was going to approach the gospel text today about Jesus calming the storm with a sermon about “getting into the boat with Jesus” – daring to sail into uncharted waters and even storms, following our Lord Jesus Christ. It’s a challenging enough message, ending with hope and awe in the one who can calm the storms of life that threaten to drown us, and make us afraid to even set sail. It would have been a good sermon, too, I think, with words we need to hear. I even was going to make references to great films that have been produced in recent years about human beings daring to set sail into dangerous waters – like Robert Redford in *All Is Lost* and George Clooney in *The Perfect Storm*. Followed up by Jesus calming the storm that terrified his disciples – that sermon was going to have everything!

But then all hell broke loose. Last Wednesday night, a young, 21-year-old white man entered Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, where church members were gathered in Bible Study and prayer. They welcomed him into their circle, he sat with them for an hour, argued a bit about the scriptures, then stood up and shot nine people dead. Including the pastor. Including six women, a grandmother, people with families who love them, for no reason at all – except that they were Black, and he is white, with a hatred based on race that has been nurtured for many generations long before this young man was even born. So nine Black lives that matter were snuffed out senselessly in a moment, with a gun which this deeply troubled white man had purchased with money he had received from his family for his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday in April. It was an evil act of terrorism directed at innocent Black people in prayer, in the house of God, a place of worship and peace, turned briefly into a setting for violence, trauma and indescribable grief. Violent murder with a gun, in a place of peace. Unspeakable evil directed at the very heart of God, momentarily traumatizing the people of God who look on our churches as sanctuaries (holy places of refuge), from a world that is often marred by turmoil, conflict and violence.

Just like the world that Jesus was born into – that we are all born into – and which Jesus challenged head on when he began his ministry of proclaiming the good news of God in that place called Galilee, long ago and far away. Jesus grew up in a society dominated by an oppressive Roman Empire, which sent an army to subjugate the people of many countries, forced them to pay tribute, and worship

Caesar as a god. Jesus proclaimed a gospel that says that there is only one God, and it is not Caesar, and he exposed the puppet king Herod, and the collaborators with Rome, as well as the religious authorities of the Temple who made life harder for their own people so that they could stay in power. Jesus traveled, taught and preached throughout the villages and towns of Galilee, Samaria, and Judea, to reach out to the many who sought healing and hope, and brought them the good news that every one of them was a child of God, beloved and precious in God's eyes. This same message of hope and compassion from God continues to be preached in the churches of Jesus Christ today – even as we are threatened by false prophets who preach a false gospel of racist hate, and fear of those who are not white, or who do not believe exactly as they do.

In the gospel story in Mark today, at the end of a long day of teaching the crowds beside the sea with parables about the kingdom of God (those lessons we read last Sunday – remember?), when evening came, Jesus suggested that he and his disciples get in a boat and go to the other side. Now, perhaps the disciples had a premonition of sailing at night on a sea frequented by storms. But they went. And sure enough, a great windstorm blew up, and soon the waves were so high that these seasoned fishermen were afraid for their lives. And Jesus was asleep in the boat. But they woke him up, asking him, “Teacher, don't you care that we are perishing out here?” So Jesus woke up, and rebuked the wind, saying “Peace. Be still!” The wind ceased, and the sea became calm. Jesus asked them why they were afraid. Did they lack faith? And they asked one another, “*Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?*” We say this is the Son of God, who has the power to do anything, and give it to us, through faith.

So late Wednesday night (when most of you were asleep, I think), I learned, first through social media, that this terrible thing had happened in South Carolina. That in this beloved church, which had long opposed slavery and been kept underground until 1865, Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, one young white man had shot nine Black church members dead in a prayer meeting. The news spread, and soon the national media picked up the story. By morning the rest of the nation had heard it. We have learned, to our dismay, that this young man was raised in a Christian home, and he was a member of an ELCA Lutheran congregation! So we are connected, if only by association as Lutherans, but also by the fact that this violence occurred in a Church when people were in prayer – just like we gather, week in and week out. And two of those pastors killed were graduates of Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary – Lutherans, just like us! And the ages of those murdered, mostly women in prayer, ranged in age from 26 to 87 years old. *Kyrie eleison*. Lord have mercy. #Black Lives Matter!

Last Thursday afternoon I gathered for prayer with 50 other clergy at St. James AME Church just across the freeway bridge over I-94, our brothers and sisters, most of whom are Black. Just two blocks away, but so distant from us, across a river of automobiles. I was called by my African American brothers and sisters who wanted to pray in the aftermath of this great tragedy – much as people of faith must have gathered over 50 years ago when four Black girls were killed by a bomb blast in a church in Birmingham, Alabama, just before worship began – set by white racist terrorists of the Ku Klux Klan. Not much has changed, has it?

So once again Christian faithful, Black and White, gathered in grief in a church sanctuary on Dale and Central avenues, looking for hope in the midst of violence and grief. They shared the bitter truth that this was not the first time for such awful tragedies, and surely not the last – in the fear that the next incident could hit any one of us. But the prayers were all said in hope that God will bring the true peace and reconciliation to the world; all we have to do is believe in it, and work for it. For Jesus himself has invited us into the boat with him, to dare to sail through these turbulent waters of racism and fear, to get to the other side across the waters, where there is forgiveness, reconciliation and peace. Even in such a time as this, there is hope because *God so loved the world that God sent God's only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him...and have life in his name!*

Do you believe this? Say “Amen!” **Amen!** Will God's love win out over racism, violence and hate? Say “Amen!” **Amen!** Will you act on your faith in God, love one another, and work to end racism and this violence in our land? Say “Amen!”

Our Presiding Bishop of the ELCA, Elizabeth Eaton, wrote a moving pastoral letter on Thursday, the day after the shooting. She wrote to remind us that the church and people of this congregation were desecrated – by the violence that occurred in God's house, and by the sin of racism, which we must acknowledge, and take responsibility for as people of faith, for we all share in this sin. Our bishop has called us first to repentance and mourning – and then to get to work. We need to examine ourselves, our church and our communities, and be honest about the reality of racism within us and around us. We need to not only listen to those who have suffered from this violence, but also to act, to speak out against racial injustice and inequities in health care, education, employment opportunities, housing, and in the criminal justice system. And then to go to work to right those wrongs, and pass legislation that will make those needed changes. Not just because our bishop calls us to do this; not just because we know this is the right thing to do, but because *God has called us to do this, to love one another as God has loved us.* It is a matter of faith – and the coming years will be our “test”.

One of the most beloved hymns in our Lutheran tradition is a paraphrase of Psalm 46 – it is titled “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”. During a time of great turmoil and warfare in Germany during the time of the Reformation, Martin Luther wrote a hymn that looked upon God as our fortress and our strength in time of trouble. Ironically, 50,000 German peasants were killed in a Peasants War that Martin Luther helped inspire, so in full disclosure, we cannot place Luther on a pedestal too high. Still, the words of this psalm are worth repeating, for it holds up faith in God in this time of sorrow and trouble in our nation and world today. For it is with faith, hope, and love, that we will address the sins of racism and violence that inflict our people and threaten the peace of our nation. Listen to these words of truth:

*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.  
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,  
    Though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;  
Though its waters roar and foam, though mountains tremble with its tumult.  
There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,  
    The holy habitation of the Most High.  
God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;  
God will help it when the morning dawns.  
The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;  
    He utters his voice, the earth melts.  
The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.  
Come behold the works of the Lord;  
    see what desolations he has brought on the earth;  
    he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire.  
Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations,  
    I am exalted in the earth.”  
The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. (Psalm 46)  
Thanks be to God. Amen.*

Let us pray:

Forgive us Lord for the sins of racism, violence and hatred for our brothers and sisters. Bless those who mourn their loved ones who were killed so tragically at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina last week, and bring healing to all who have suffered.

Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

We remember the faithful lives of those who died in your house, O Lord:

Pastor Clemente Pinckney, age 41;

Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, age 45;

Ethel Lance, age 70;

Susie Jackson, age 87;

Cynthia Hurd, age 54;

DePayne Middleton Doctor, age 49;

Tywanza Sanders, age 26;

Myra Thompson, age 59,

Retired Pastor Daniel Lee Simmons Sr., age 74

May they rest in peace from their labors, and may the way in which they died awaken us to the sins of violence and racism that afflict our homes, our communities, and even your Church, O Lord. Inspire us by your Spirit to work tirelessly for justice, with love for one another, to bring your peace to this world.

Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Forgive our sins of complacency in the face of racism and cruelty toward others.

Grant, O God, that your holy and life-giving Spirit may move every human heart; that the barriers dividing us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease; and that with our divisions healed, we might live in justice and peace;

Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**