“MAKING STILL THE STORM: THOUGHTS ON TRAGEDY.”

From Matthew 8: 23-27

Jon R. Wallace – July 22, 2012

Two Days After the Aurora Theatre Massacre

“Help, God, help!” “Help, God, help!” This is all that came to mind as I struggled to write this sermon. “Help, God, help!” The words I had prayed Friday morning were similar. “Oh, God, fill me with your strength and with your courage, and make me an instrument of your peace. I need your strength and courage. Help me to be an instrument of your peace. Help, God, help! Help, God, help!”

There had been a voicemail message I could barely understand. “Big group of friends…from her last job…four in surgery in University Hospital…in surgery waiting…please call.” And I did, then ran for the car.

It takes a lot for people to ask for help to still the storms of life. I mean, there are so many expectations people put on us and that we put on ourselves. You’ve heard them.... we are to “pull ourselves up by our bootstraps,” “pull yourself together,” and my favorite – remember, “to keep a stiff upper lip.” Pride gets in the way, as does the fear of rebuke. I often wonder if my parents really heard someone admonish them to remember their lips when children in World War 2 scarred Britain. That phrase was invented there, you know. “There, there dear, keep a stiff upper lip” my Granny Goodchild or Nana Wallace might have said. No. With Nazi bombers flying overhead, I think my parents would have heard from their mothers; “Help, God, help!”

The story in our scripture verse highlights just how hard it is to ask for help. The disciples were in a boat with Jesus and a windstorm arose. They likely said nothing thinking they’d be fine, then kept their anxiety at bay and their lips stiff until the rocking boat began to swamp. What did they see then but Jesus snoozing? And this was too much for them. “Help, God, help!” “Help, God, help!” And, of course, Jesus did help. But he did rebuke them a little, pointing out their lack of faith.

Perhaps in a moment of his humanness even Jesus forgot just how hard it is to ask for help? But, still, the cry went out and help was given and the storm became still.

I wonder how many times that plea has been heard or prayed in Aurora this weekend? In Aurora and all across the country wherever parents, families, friends, co-workers, loved ones, and others heard that their child, friend, relative, or neighbor had been shot in the latest senseless act of gun violence to strike our land? Why do these awful dreadful things happen? There is only one answer to this that I know of and the rest we must leave to mystery.

And the answer is: shit happens! It just does! Yet, my friend and Iliff School of Theology professor Dr. Larry Graham says God is unalterably benevolent and always present, even in circumstances of loss, chaos, and evil. Such nightmares are part of our lives because our reality is finite which means we have limited capacity to control final endings and its sinful meaning we people do bad things to one another and the world by intention and by neglect. Even though shit happens and circumstances come into our lives that are undesirable and unwanted, they do not negate the fact of God’s providence as goodness and gracious presence. Rather, tragedy, chaos, loss, and evil go with our finite and sinful existence. God is not their cause, but God is present to us through the love and presence of others to help us bear them.

Since we are finite, and God isn’t, when shit happens it raises questions of God’s providence and we may feel that God is absent, or punishing, or like Jesus – sleeping in the bottom of the boat, or just plain cruel. Thinking this way is normal and understandable because we are human and we ask the tough questions. What we are asked to do then is to look deeper and to recognize that limits (finitude) and loss are part of what it means to be human and to see in the caregiving of our fellow humans the loving presence of a God who never fails nor forsakes us.

Help, Jesus, help! And the storm was stilled. Jesus was seen in his humanness…. or was he? I think, perhaps, he was seen in his divinity – not rebuking but understanding. God does understand us, for we are God’s creation. Yes, we are often of little faith – this is simply part of being human but Jesus wasn’t rebuking. He was acknowledging the truth of human existence. Thank you, God, for loving us and knowing us so well!

Help, God, help! Help, God, help!

Upon arrival at University Hospital I met up with my friend and fellow Iliff graduate who was tending to her flock of young restaurant workers in various stages of surgery and recovery. Following a long hug we went to the room of a young woman with bullet wounds in her legs and her arm and in her face where a bullet tore through her cheek taking several teeth.

Through the afternoon and into the evening I sat with this woman and her friends offering what I prayed would be enough – just my presence and a listening ear. And this is what I heard…

“He shot me and I couldn’t move. I was just laying there, then a policeman came and carried me out.”

Help, God, help! AND A POLICEMAN CAME AND SAVED HER LIFE.

“Thank you for being here for me, you were just what I needed.”

Help, God, help! AND A SHOULDER TO LEAN ON APPEARED.

“I’m really hungry.”

Help, God, help! AND A KIND AND CARING HOSPITAL WORKER BROUGHT A STRAWBERRY MILKSHAKE, THE FIRST SUSTENANCE SINCE TRAGEDY.

“She threw herself over me to protect me or I’d have been hurt much worse.”

Help, God, help! AND A FRIEND PUT HERSELF BETWEEN THE ONE AND THE SHOOTER.

Help, God, help!

Perhaps there is one here this morning in need of a little help, a hug or two, or someone in need of a companion? You know who you are. You all know who these people are in your lives. Maybe you are one? There are people in this sanctuary and members of this church who have ministered directly to lives struck by the tragedy this week, nurses, chaplains, support workers… Reach out to them today and say “thank you.” “God bless you.” “How do you do it?” “I love you so much.”

All of us know people in the midst of tragedy and heartache of many kinds. This morning I am asking you to reach out to each other. Don’t leave this place today until you have listened, hugged, or ministered in some way to at least one other person.

For God is available now breathing in and through each of us. Working through our hands, and hearts, and efforts towards peace and justice. Spreading God’s unconditional love in our neighborhoods where Jesus hands and feet and compassion are needed.

Reach out today. The Holy Spirit will guide you.

Help, God, help!

Help, God, help!

Yes, God is always there helping, ALWAYS THERE, MAKING STILL THE STORM,

**through each of us**!

To the people of Aurora: May God bring you comfort and healing in the days to come. AMEN.