



Seismic Storm: In the boat together with Jesus beside us

Sermon by the Rev. Amy E. Reumann,
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Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

Our advocacy in light of disasters intensified by climate change brought together a group of faith and community leaders for an event hosted in Washington, D.C. by ELCA Advocacy in the spring of 2019. The challenge may be seismic, but the Rev. Amy E. Reumann offered insight and guidance on contemporary issues and scriptural and church resources, preparing us to care in this storm. This is text from which Pr. Reumann preached a sermon during the Opening Worship of the 2019 ELCA Advocacy Convening.

The story of Jesus calming the storm is a story of Jesus revealing a new dimension of his power. Till now he has been healing, driving out demons, attracting a following. But now he is taking a break, setting out on a three-hour cruise, crossing the sea of Galilee and apparently so tired he has commandeered the only cushion on board and is sleeping soundly through a storm that has blown up. This is not just any summer squall. The word used is *seismos*, which is usually used in Scripture to describe an earthquake that shakes the ground and everything on it.

So now we know that Jesus is in a small boat and surrounded by a Category 3 tempest. When his frightened followers wake him up, Jesus does Jesus. He demonstrates that even the wildest wind and waves, those ancient symbols for chaos and the demonic, are no

match for him. Using words he only ever uses to address the forces of evil, Jesus commands elements of nature, “Be silent!” And there was dead calm.

Disciples’ fear

This story about Jesus’ power is also a tale of the disciples who are uncertain about their own abilities. Until now they have been following Jesus, from whom they’ve received authority to cast out demons, but not much seems to have rubbed off. When we meet them in the middle of the wind-whipped lake, they are in a panic (which is strange considering many of them made their living fishing its depths every day). We hear from the fearful disciples almost the first words they speak in the earliest of the Gospels, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” Not necessarily the first lines you want to be remembered for.

Perhaps fear rendered them unable to act. Their reptilian brains took over. They heeded the primal grey matter that governs survival instincts, that signals whether we choose fight or flight. But both instincts failed them, and they did the only thing they could – turn in terror to the one who had so far slept on the pillow in the stern.

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He 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 the sea obey him?” (Mark 4:35-41)

But Jesus, after he subdues the seismic event, turns to them, “*Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?*” Why no faith? Isn’t turning to Jesus in need and asking for help a sign of great faith? Is he saying they could have handled it without him? Should they have seen the danger and headed to shore earlier? Or is Jesus pointing out that they have already been given what they need but their fear got in the way.

Facing the full reality

Facing the full reality of the climate crisis is terrifying. It triggers in me flight or fright. When I dwell on the details, it is immobilizing. As ELCA Advocacy, climate cuts across every issue area that we cover and makes it worse, from food security to national security. From increased migration and refugees to heightened international conflict and local violence. From health care to habitat loss. We have a storm, and it is here, and we are perishing.

Drought. Heat. There are now No-go zones.

There are now wildfires in places there never used to be, in the reaches of Siberia and the arctic north. Closer to home, in California, a town named Paradise was turned into a living hell as fires intensified by climate change burned everything in their path.

Climate drives civil unrest. I read recently in detail how drought and resultant food insecurity drove the crisis in Darfur, how it lurks at the roots of the Syrian Civil War and horrendous aftermath.

Jesus, do you not care that we are perishing?

There’s not only fire. There is also water. The city of Houston took on five feet of water during Hurricane Harvey. It even sunk a few centimeters. Texas and Louisiana had 33 trillion gallons of water dumped on them. For comparison, if you piled up 20 trillion gallons of water over the District of Columbia (approximately 68 square miles), the height of the water would be 1,410 feet — or almost the height of the Empire State Building.

God promised never to destroy world again by flood, but God never said we wouldn’t accomplish the job ourselves.

Cyclone Idai has been called the worst disaster in the history of the southern hemisphere, dumping a year’s worth of rain in a matter of days. Cyclone Idai is not just a natural disaster. The storm was made worse by climate change AND centuries of colonialism. In year of the Quadricentennial of the first transatlantic ships bringing enslaved Africans to Jamestown, we remember that during four centuries of colonial rule, Mozambique was plundered for people to work U.S. plantations and natural resources to profit global wealth. It was left, after independence, a nation impoverished and unprepared to respond to the massive suffering following disaster. And as we speak, they are confronting the destruction from Cyclone Kenneth.

Jesus, do you not care that we are perishing?

Then there are the people dislocated by climate. The so-called national security crisis at our border is a climate crisis. Central America, with oceans so close on both sides, is more vulnerable to rapid temperature changes. People from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador are leaving their countries because crops are no longer viable, because jobs are scarce, and jobs and lack resources support the rise of gangs and incubate the violence that so many flee.

The United Nations estimates that in the next century, the number of climate refugees will number between 200 million and one billion. The storm we face is not only at sea, as wave upon wave of humans fleeing disasters will come up upon borders. We are unprepared as a world for these impacts. We are in denial as a nation.

Jesus, do you not care that we are perishing?

Navigating the strange, new world of accelerating climate change is a bit like being on the boat, out on the lake, tossed about by elements seemingly out of our control and getting worse, threatening the survival of every species on this planet. What do our reptilian brains do?

Flight and fight options

Flight is not an option. The New York Times recently reported that Duluth is the most climate resistant city in the U.S.

Before we put in mobility papers to Northeastern Minnesota Synod, let me remind you, no one will be immune. If we aren't in the next catastrophe, we will be responding to the people that are.

Fright is appropriate. Attending UN COP24, hearing day after day the extent and outlook for climate impacts, I would clutch up. But that can't be our lasting response. Denial is not an option. Scientists have been our prophets, naming the danger we create, calling us to repent and turn around. Now is the time.

Fight is what we have to do. Despite this Administration's turning back the clock and wasting precious years, we still have huge sectors of society working on climate – from the Pentagon that named climate as a top threat to national security, to the 13 agencies who contributed to this year's National Climate Assessment outlining what will happen in each region of the country and what we have to do to address it. We are fighting, led in some places by the governors, states, cities, corporations and local actors who continue to meet our pledges of the Paris Agreement. There is hope, but there is a small window of time to act before irreversible changes kick in, and that window is in the next decade. It is time to fight, and our children are showing us how, as world-wide youth are rising up, walking out of school and striking. They are frightened, and they are angry, and they are ready. But they need us now.

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Sent out at the turning point

Jesus stilling the storm is a turning point for the disciples. Not long after, Jesus breaks up the band, sends the 12 out to do the things they had been too tentative to do before. Preach repentance. Cast out demons. Anoint the sick and cure them. When no one will hear them, he says, shake the dust off and move on.

What we are facing as a church, as a nation, as a world, demands all of us be sent out. We are focused as a church on vital congregations and building leaders, but we only need them on a planet that can support human habitation. The offense against climate change must be multifaceted, and there is a part for everyone.

Recently the Washington Post magazine had a cover article on climate change, 24 covers to be exact. There are so many aspects, challenges and stories that the article is made up of 24 possible magazine covers that illustrate all the fronts we need to address.

In the same way, for tonight's opening we decided against one keynoter. We don't need to hear from one perspective. We need to address the climate crisis on multiple fronts, so we have nine keynoters tonight giving Ted-style talks about their lived experience as meteorologists, as disaster coordinators, as community activists representing communities of poverty and the voices of our indigenous peoples. We need everyone's story about climate impacts, and everyone's expertise in the solutions.

What we have to do now as a world – no one can do alone.

Fixes

Fixes are technological, being pursued through R&D and innovation. The fixes are financial. The Congressional Budget Office estimates we will need \$54 Billion annually to address climate impacts in the U.S.

But some fixes are theological and spiritual, and the church has a responsibility to work to address these roots of the crisis. We are here because the damage to our climate is an outcome of sin expressed through human selfishness, greed and shortsightedness, and our future is not secured without our repentance, confession and conversion to new relationships with God, one another and the earth around us.

It is why tonight we begin with the repudiation of Doctrine of Discovery to anchor and guide our climate efforts. The climate crisis is symptom of how far we are from God's intention. The western and European driven colonization and exploitation of indigenous peoples is intertwined with our colonization of Creation and our treatment of the earth as an

endless storehouse to supply our whims and needs, a commodity to be used and used up at will. We need to confess. We need to lament. But then, as one pastor said to me, “The tribal leaders in my area are tired of our confessions. They want to see my actions.”

Irreplaceable role of the church

The church has an irreplaceable role in making a path through the climate crisis. As intensified natural disasters continue to hit us, we see in yet another way how the legacy of racism is baked into who receives, who receives what kind, of aid. National Public Radio reported this year that the billions of federal dollars that help individuals and communities rebuild go disproportionately to white and wealthy Americans. Why? Because it is not given on the basis of need but according to cost benefit analysis related to taxpayer risk, which rewards those who live in higher income neighborhoods. Our advocacy is needed on this, as it is on funding for the Nutrition Assistance Program in Puerto Rico, which as a territory does not receive SNAP but a capped block grant for feeding hungry people, and that money has run out without Congressional action. We respond through Lutheran Disaster Response, but we also have the responsibility as citizens to ensure that federal help reaches those most in need, that adaptation and mediation efforts include communities of color and people in poverty, and that account is taken of the brunt of climate burden on women.

The church’s voice is essential to make sure in our transition from fossil fuels to renewables that we make sure the people who have depended on extractive industries for their livelihood, often to the detriment of their own health, are not left behind. And while we are about this change, we have an opportunity to refamiliarize ourselves with our statement on economic life and reimagine economies that are sustainable and sufficient for all, planned with the needs of the most vulnerable in the forefront.

Afraid of the wrong things

There is a lot to be afraid of... but sometimes we’ve been afraid of the wrong things.

Sometimes I think the storm that has to be stilled is not the elements out there, like reigning in GHG emissions or energy consumption, but the denial in our communities and the resistance in our hearts.

The storm that has to be stilled is preachers who feel they can’t mention climate change in their congregations because it is too divisive, or congregational members who have been warned off speaking about it because it is too political.

Have we still no faith? I am sure Jesus is not sleeping through this storm. And I believe Jesus has given us what we need to still it. I believe we are called for such a time and just this seismic task.

In the boat

When Prime Minister Bainimarama of Fiji addressed the UN General Assembly, representing a nation in the thick of rising oceans, he described the Fijian ocean-going canoe or “drua” saying, “As nations of the world, we are all in the same canoe. We either address this emergency as one world together, and we can’t do this without everyone playing their part.”

We are in the boat already. Jesus has given us what we need. My fervent hope and prayer is that we will chart a course as a church together to persistently and resolutely be bearers of God’s fierce love and deep justice. Peace, be still. We got this. Together in the boat – let us go over to the other side. Guided by our Lord and these words from “Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope and Justice,” our social statement from 1993:

Given the power of sin and evil in this world, as well as the complexity of environmental problems,
we know we can find no “quick fix”—whether technological, economic, or spiritual.

A sustainable environment requires a sustained effort from everyone.

The prospect of doing too little too late leads many people to despair.

But as people of faith, captives of hope, and vehicles of God’s promise, we face the crisis.