

Season of Creation-Storm Sunday

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Vicar Paul Eldred

September 18th, 2016

Grace and peace to you from God our Creator and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

My siblings in Christ, let me say how grateful I am to be with you all.

I've had the chance to meet some of you by now, but for those who don't know me, I am Vicar Paul Eldred and this is the third week of my pastoral residency here at Wicker Park Lutheran.

I look forward to getting to know you all during my year here, but for just a short blurb about me, I am a senior at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago down in Hyde Park. I spent the past year as a full-time pastoral intern in St. Peter, Minnesota.

Even though I've spent the past three years in the Midwest, I'm not from here – the Pacific Northwest is home for me.

In fact, three years ago as my husband and I were moving from Seattle to Chicago so I could start seminary, I remember very clearly the day we could tell that we had entered the Midwest.

We were driving through eastern South Dakota and whizzing past cornfields and wheat fields and then some more cornfields and I wondered what the next few years would be like.

And then, as happens in the Midwest, the skies started to change color and darken. We could see the clouds building up behind us as we raced down the interstate. And just about the time it was pitch black outside, the first bolt of lightning flashed down from the sky.

Now, there are many differences between the Midwest and the Pacific Northwest, but one is

this: we never get lightning.

Really, once or twice a year is the maximum.

And since I'd lived my entire life in the Northwest and Alaska, this was my first time driving through lightning – and I was *terrified*.

Each lightning bolt made me jump and then the rain started pouring down too.

It got to the point where I had to pull over and make my husband, Ryan, drive for a while as I cowered in the passenger seat.

It's times like this that give me a lot of sympathy for the disciples in today's gospel reading.

There they are, in the middle of the Sea of Galilee in a small little boat and a storm comes down on them.

The waves are raging so much that the boat starts to sink.

The disciples, understandably, are fearing for their lives.

So they turn to Jesus, who somehow is sleeping through this storm, and wake him up.

And when Jesus wakes up, he commands the storm to cease – and it was calm. The disciples are amazed.

Yes, they are amazed that their friend and teacher has such power over the elements of creation, but I think they're also amazed because they're starting to understand who is actually in the boat with them.

I think this is when they realize that this man is more than a teacher and healer – that God is physically and truly in the boat with them during the storm.

And while they are relieved that the storm has ended and they are safe, I imagine that they are

even more at peace when they understand the full magnitude of what Jesus' presence means to them: that even in the midst of the storm, Jesus – God – is with them.

When I was living in Minnesota last year, we had our fair share of thunderstorms. And while I never quite got used to them, I did appreciate their beauty: the rain they brought that watered the corn and soybean crops, the magnificent colors the sky turned, and the particular smell that follows lightning storms.

Not to mention that they usually brought the humidity levels down.

I even have friends who looked forward to these storms – who would rush outside to see them roll in across the prairie.

But each time a storm came, I would keep in my mind the awesome power that they can yield and wonder, 'will this one cause destruction? Will this one turn into a tornado?'

Eighteen years ago, the little town where I served my internship did experience a devastating tornado.

I've been told that nearly all of the buildings in the town were damaged in some way – and many were destroyed.

That day changed the town and many still mark its occurrence in daily conversations – "back before the tornado" or "since the tornado," were common phrases while I was there.

But the damage from that storm also brought the people of St. Peter together and strengthened their bonds of community in the rebuilding. New relationships were formed and new ideas proposed.

St. Peter is also home to Gustavus Adolphus College, an ELCA school, and the campus was hard hit by the tornado.

Christ Chapel, an impressive building right at the center of campus, was no exception – all of its windows were broken and its iconic steeple, visible for miles around, snapped and fell through the roof of the church.

But as the damaged was assessed in the building, one of the chaplains at the time made an interesting discovery – the chapel’s sanctuary lamp, a candle some congregations burn continuously to represent Christ’s eternal presence with us (WPLC?) was still burning.

Even though the windows had blown out and the roof had fallen in, this symbolic candle was still burning – reminding them that Christ was and is with them amid the destruction and confusion that engulfed the town.

St. Peter is obviously not the only place to have experienced such devastating storms.

From Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans to the Japanese Tsunami that inspired our hymn of the day, we see or experience the destructive power of storms all around us.

We see the aftermath and the calls to donate money or blood or supplies.

And we wonder, where is God in all of this? Why is there such pain and damage caused by God’s good creation?

If you listen to some loud voices on TV, you may hear that these storms are proof of God’s wrath on the earth.

I have heard that these storms are caused by gay marriage or by religious pluralism or because any number of hot-button issues.

But the God I know does not cause suffering, but suffers with us.

The God I know does not inflict pain, but is with us when we hurt.

Hear again the words from our absolution this morning: “Your God is not high in heaven

playing wild games with nature...Your God is the suffering God, revealed on the cross, Your God suffers with all who suffer after a storm. God too suffers in our storms.”

God is not sending storms to punish us, God is with us – Christ is with us, in the boat, ready to calm our fears, to comfort us in our despair, and give us peace.