

Signs that God is Near

When I was a little girl, I lived in Akron Ohio, where there seemed to be a lot of tornado weather. I remember the familiar sound of the weather warning on the radio and TV, announcing high winds or the spotting of a funnel cloud. I recall going into the basement for the allotted warning time.

When I was about 4 or 5 years old, I was over at the next door neighbor's house. A storm was brewing, high winds were starting, and my mother came outside to call me to come home. I was just in the next yard, and as I made my way home, the wind began to buffet me. I panicked. My mother, a tiny woman, tried to pick me up and take me inside. But I was so scared, I was fighting against her, and she had to sit with me on the porch step until my fear passed. My fear at the moment was greater than the wind around me.

To this day, I get a little triggered by storms. I feel a dread that grows in me with the sound of wind and the rain. The dog knows just how I feel, as she doesn't like storms either. Sometimes we hide together from them.

When I think of these stories of Jesus, where great needs are met, hungers sated and fears calm, sometimes I pair them with the deep fears and hungers that I have walked with, so I can place myself emotionally in that place where God seeks to meet me.

So the part of the today's Gospel where the followers of Jesus are tossed about and frightened, and they see help coming and can only sit with it until they get to shore, that resonates with me. I think of how my mother sat with me until I was calm enough to be taken inside. And I consider how my internal storm is sometimes greater than the one on the outside. In this story from John, Jesus doesn't calm the winds and the waves, he just gets in the boat with his followers and the shore appears. Stable ground.

I find that in my life, Jesus often works this way. He tends not to calm the outside storm, the rest of the world, but he sits with me in my inner storm until it is calm and we can move on.

In John's story of the feeding of the 5,000 there is another kind of accompaniment. In the other versions of the story in the synoptic gospels, Jesus uses the bread that his disciples bring with them, and he asks his followers to distribute the food. But in this one, Jesus procures the barley loaves and dried fish himself from a child in the crowd. It is the food of the poor. And he distributes it himself.

There are times when Jesus, knowing my internal poverty, my hunger to be filled by hope, or faith, or strength, meets me and feeds me with what is at hand. I think here of people who Jesus brings into my life who reassure me at just the right moment. I think of a Scripture that I encounter at just the right time that speaks to my soul. Simple things. Quotidian things. The food of the poor.

But this feeding and calming that I recognize in my life as the work of God, is not meant for me alone. Jesus' acts are public ones; they create communities, communion with us and with God.

God has a long history of feeding his people – Manna in the wilderness, the prophet Elijah feeding a starving widow and her son, and the barley loaves that Elisha blesses so that all eat and there is some left.

And there are these amazing stories of Jesus feeding the crowds with just a few loaves and fishes. It is the only miracle found in all four Gospels. In some of these stories Jesus is moved with compassion at the neediness of the crowd.

But in John's gospel Jesus knows what he is going to do ahead of time. This will be more than a feeding miracle. It will be a sign. But what of, and for whom?

We are in the Gospel of John, so Jesus is pointing to God and to God's glory, revealing it, participating in it. With dried fish and barley loaves, the food of the poor, Jesus points to God as hope for the poor. Spoiler alert, next week in John's Gospel Jesus will declare himself the bread of life. He has his father are one, find Jesus, you'll find God.

And perhaps that's why the crowd gathers on this mountain with Jesus on this Passover, instead of being at the temple. On this Holy Day of deliverance, Jesus points to the God who saves, indeed participates in the saving. Even later that night, Jesus walks on the water of a stormy sea, and gets in the boat with his followers just as the boat reaches the shore. Jesus points to God who is master of the wind and waves, and who completes the frightening journey with his people.

The people of the gospels are poor, they are hungry, they are frightened, they are often sick. We see in them their need for their God, their reliance on the covenant they made with God. And we see a need that extends beyond Israel to the wider world that God is revealing the divine self to through Jesus.

The question for us, is not only what do we need personally from our savior, but what do we need to strengthen us as a people of God? What feeds our communion? What heals our breaks and calms our collective fear? What strengthens us for the work ahead, for we are not the only ones who have been hungry, and frightened and needing God's healing.

The gospels call us to think like a body, a collective body that is united in God. Jesus is the sign of what God hopes to do in our lives and in the world, through the one who feeds us, calms our fears and strengthens us to join him in the journey.

Amen.