

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Lena, IL - 21 August 2022
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost - Year C - Lectionary 21

1st Reading: *Isaiah 58:9b-14*

Psalm: *103:1-8*

2nd Reading: *Hebrews 12:18-29*

Gospel: *Luke 13:10-17*

Sermon - *Vicar Thomas J. Mosbø*

In the name of the Father, ✠ and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I suspect that some of us gathered here today may be a little afraid of lightning. It can be pretty scary when it's up close and personal.

My wife, Coral, has a very good reason for fearing lightning. She grew up on the south shore of Long Island, New York, close enough to the shore that she had a canal in her back yard that led out to a bay that connected to the Atlantic Ocean. And her parents owned a boat, large enough to have a little galley and a cabin with bunk beds, so their family went out on the bay or along the coast quite frequently. One of the other items that was important on this boat was the ship-to-shore radio, which had a very tall antenna. And maybe you have an idea where I'm going with this.

One day, when Coral was a teenager, their boat was moored and tied together next to their neighbour's boat out in the bay. It was a grey day, threatening rain, but none had come yet, so it didn't seem like a dangerous place to be. But the first lightning strike has to hit somewhere. And where are the most dangerous places to be when lightning strikes? Near a tree, on a golf course, in an open field, or on a boat in the sea. So out of the blue came the very first bolt of lightning of the day, looking for the tallest object, and better still, the tallest metal object, to hit, which happened to be the antenna of their ship-to-shore radio. There was a tremendous explosion, which tore a chunk out of the neighbour's boat. And Coral was barefoot on the damp deck of their boat. Let's just say it was a shocking experience. Everyone felt the jolt, and the neighbour boy's hair was singed. Ever since then, Coral has had a very healthy respect - let's be honest and call it fear - of lightning when it gets too close.

But lightning is also a very majestic and beautiful thing. And it is good for plants because it puts nitrogen in the soil. But that doesn't stop it from being frightening.

So, again, let's be honest. God is frightening. There is no way around it. Indeed, the very thought of who God really is can be utterly terrifying. The author of the letter to the Hebrews - whom I think the evidence strongly suggests was the apostle Barnabas (but that's another story) - gives us a description this morning of God's revelation to Moses and the people of Israel at Mount Sinai: "a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear." And this passage ends by telling us that "our God is a consuming fire" - terrifying indeed.

Now, we Lutherans like sermons that quote the first letter of John, that "God is love" - very comforting, very gentle, cozy, and safe - and since I John is my favourite book of the Bible, my typical sermons do tend to be of that variety - but we don't tend to preach sermons based on the idea that "God is a consuming fire". And yet God is frightening, even if God is love. Remember how every time an angel appears in the Bible, the first words out of his mouth are "Don't be afraid"? If a mere angel is that frightening, what about God himself?

One bolt of lightning releases a tremendous amount of energy. But that's one tiny crackle compared to the power of the sun, a raging nuclear furnace that would consume the entire earth in a second if it got too near. And scientists estimate that our sun is just one of about 300 trillion stars in the universe. I can't comprehend that number, let alone the power represented by that many raging nuclear furnaces. And yet the entire universe is a mere passing thought in the mind of God. The very thought of who God really is is not merely mind-boggling, it is incomprehensible, and yes, terrifying.

I hope some of you may be familiar with the Narnia stories, written by C.S. Lewis, one of my favourite authors. If you are, you may remember that in the fantasy land of Narnia, the lion Aslan represents Jesus. In the very first book - The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe - the four children from our world who stumble into Narnia first hear about Aslan from Mr. and Mrs. Beaver. But when they hear that Aslan is a lion, one of them [page 75], Susan, asks: "Is he - quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."

"That you will, dearie, and no mistake," said Mrs. Beaver; "if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or just plain silly."

"Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy.

"Safe?" said Mr. Beaver; "don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

So, there it is... Jesus isn't safe. God isn't safe, any more than a lion, or a bolt of lightning, or the power of 300 trillion stars is safe. But he's good. God *is* love. But even his love isn't always "safe", or gentle, or cozy. It is powerful, and transforms us sometimes in frightening ways. Was Jesus' crucifixion "safe", or even his resurrection? Mark tells us that the women initially "fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid".

Even the story about Jesus this morning is a bit frightening. He is teaching in the synagogue when he sees a woman bent over, from an illness she has had for 18 years, and he heals her - without her asking, without consulting with anyone. Even that kind of power might seem frightening to us if Jesus were here in the flesh today.

And Jesus is here today, in the sacrament of Holy Communion. We will eat and drink his body and blood. And Jesus' frightening power of transforming love will enter us and heal our spirits so that we can live in him. So, as the passage from Hebrews urges us, "let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe" Or in the words of one of my favourite hymns:

Let all mortal flesh keep silence
and with fear and trembling stand;
ponder nothing earthly-minded,
for with blessing in his hand
Christ, our God, to earth descending,
comes our homage to command.

King of kings, yet born of Mary,
as of old on earth he stood,
Lord of lords in human likeness,
in the body and the blood
he will give to all the faithful
his own self for heavenly food.

Amen!

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