

Finding Our Way Together

Have you ever been outside in a really intense storm? In Colorado we didn't get tornadoes, but our thunderstorms were wild! I have many stories of being caught out in storms, which is another one of the reasons I used to have the nickname lightening, but one of those experiences was so profound that my body still feels it. I was leading a group of kids with on a backcountry pack trip. We were four days in, far from any sort of civilization, and it had been a rainy trip. Everything was soaked, everyone was worn out, and nerves were getting raw...when the thunder started in the distance. When lightening rolls through the mountains, it echoes off the steep canyon walls, reverberating in your bones. The summer itself had been epically stormy and even the horses had developed anxiety about the lightening. So when we started feeling and hearing that thunder, and the rain started coming down harder, and the kids started getting worried and the horses started getting antsy, you can imagine how I was feeling, as the leader of this crew, isolated in the wilderness. We were not in a densely forested area; it was mostly scrub-brush and sparse aspen trees. And as the lightning got closer, I was crying out to God for help. We wound around a corner and found a pine grove. The trees were unusually tall and closely packed together. Normally you don't want to be under tall trees in a lightning storm, but we had no shelter at all, and full exposure was hardly a better option. We dismounted the horses, tying them to trees, and we walked deeper into the forest. The trees kept a surprising amount of rain off, so it was almost misty; ethereal. And the trees were so tall it felt like walking into a cathedral. The pine needles on the ground were so thick it was like walking on a mattress, so we sat down and waited out the storm. The crashing thunder and pounding rain were far too loud to talk over so we silently watched and waited. It was the most bizarre experience because of the conflicting emotions running through me. Physically, I was exhausted from the cold and wet and work of that kind of trip in those conditions. Intellectually I was spinning from weighing my options, trying to keep everyone

safe, and make good choices. But spiritually, I felt a supernatural sense of peace envelope me. I felt held and protected, seen by God, and safe. Which makes no sense. And yet, my body still remembers the warm sense of quiet peace that transcended everything that should have been overpoweringly threatening.

Every time I read Psalm 29; I think of that experience. Hebrew poetry does not always translate well into English, and this is a perfect example. The way the words sound in the Hebrew language is meant to evoke a storm. The sheets of pounding rain, the crashing of thunder, the images of God's power and dominance over and above the storm repeat their way through this Psalm so the listener feels the awe and majesty of a crashing thunderstorm.

In the ancient world, water was often portrayed as chaos, a tremendous threat, and it was also one of the gods they honored. This Psalm portrays our God enthroned above the flooding waters, proving God's power to subdue the mightiest foe and the greatest threat. In this Psalm, in contrast to the terror of the electricity from the rods of lightning and the flooding waters, the poem ends with God's peace. The things that threaten lose their ability to feel threatening when we know the one who holds the greater power.

Jesus' life demonstrated the type of faith and humility that allowed him to repeatedly experience God's peace. Not only did God leave the safety of Heaven to enter a human form, but then he condescended further. He joined a mob of common people on the banks of a river and allowed himself to be lowered under the baptismal waters by a raving prophet. He identified himself as part of the crowd, alongside the people. Rather than separating from them or expecting the people to come to where he was. As an entrance point to his ministry, Jesus submitted himself under John's prophetic authority among a

crowd that Matthew says was comprised of all sorts of people including the fractious Pharisees and Sadducees. Jesus didn't stand apart and he didn't take sides. He took part.

When John speaks of the coming Holy Spirit, the image comes across as violent and threatening. But when the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus, moments later, the image is of a dove, the symbol of peace. Jesus' humility left nothing to purge away so the Holy Spirit appeared in peace. It is only that which separates us from one another and from God that is threatened by God's holy fire.

Today's account in Acts helps us understand the way God's creates peace, when we humbly participate with God's work. When we read about the Samaritan believers who had been baptized, we might wonder why they hadn't also received the Holy Spirit. After Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit arrived, that spirit had become available to all believers. So why not the Samaritans? Well, if you will recall, historically the Jews and the Samaritans were not congenial! They despised each other in the worst possible ways. After Jesus ascended to Heaven, the Jews were still wrapping their head around the fact that the Messiah had come for anyone other than Jews. That Samaritans, their enemies, accepted the gospel of Christ was mind blowing! God didn't withhold the Spirit from the Samaritans as punishment. God used this occasion to teach the Jewish believers in Jerusalem that the authenticity of the gospel required the inclusion of everyone, particularly those they detested most. That was the point. Unity. The destruction of old dividing lines. For the gospel to be good news, it had to be good news for everyone. For the gospel to be good news for the Samaritans, the Jews had to let their historic divisions melt away. They had to touch with their hands, what they once believed to be unclean. And it was through their connected hands that the Spirit of God moved and changed the world. It is our humility before God and our unity with one another that brings peace.

The work of the Holy Spirit for the New Testament believers must have felt like a powerful storm. Everything was changing. The excitement from the appearance of the Messiah, seeing and participating in the miraculous works of God, having enemies transformed into allies...all of it would have been electrifying, confusing, exciting, but unsettling.

As humans, we don't always deal well with change. We like things to stay the same, so we know what to expect. We work hard to form our patterns of doing things so upending those familiar ways is not something we always embrace. Conversely, God loves doing new things! God is always inviting us into new life, new beginnings, new relationships, new ways of doing relationships, and new hope. Which all sounds great except for the part that embracing these new things often requires that we let go of the old, comfortable ways. Sometimes the shedding of old things feels as threatening as being caught outside in a lightning storm. When we remember that God is both enthroned above the storm and with us in the storm, we can find peace within the storm.

2024 involved a lot of change for the people of Grace Church. Some of us may be walking into 2025 as if it is already a storm or still drying out from last year's storms. Whether you find yourself suffering from grief and loss or excited with hopeful anticipation as we step into this New Year together, my greatest hope is that we all experience the peace of God that is available in the midst of every storm. And that we recognize our participation together through the storms IS THE PLACE where we will always find the Holy Spirit of God most actively at work.

Jesus willingly went under the waters of baptism to participate with us, to show us how to trust God enough to participate with one another. May we be a people who hold onto our faith and to one another so we can experience the peace of God in every moment of our lives. And may we be a people whose experiences of God's faithfulness reach out through our hands to participate in healing the world around us. Amen.