

STORMY WEATHER

Preached by The Rev. Ruth E. Shaver at the United Church of Schellsburg UCC, JUNE 25, 2006

On the 49th Anniversary of the United Church of Christ

Job 38:1-11

Mark 4:35-41

My parents and my brother live in Corpus Christi, Texas, which is separated from the Gulf of Mexico only by a barrier island known to spring breakers as Padre Island. My grandfather, my aunt and uncle, and two of my cousins and their families live in Miami, Florida.

We take hurricane season very seriously in my family because we know that the seas do sometimes burst forth from the womb despite God's doors.

Hurricane Andrew back in 1992 did some damage to family property in Miami, but considering the force of the storm, my family was very lucky to have had as little as they did. Last summer, my grandmother, who was still alive at the time, and my grandfather were shuttered in at their assisted living facility almost continuously from the time Hurricane Katrina evolved as a tropical storm to the time Hurricane Wilma finally cleared the Florida Straits on her way to the Central American coast. My cousins only took down what hurricane shutters they needed to for safe access and emergency exits from their homes.

Corpus Christi has not been the point of landfall for a storm since 1970, well before we moved there in 1982. It has, however, been in the red zone of predicted landfall several times, including Hurricane Gilbert in 1988, for which my parents evacuated to San Antonio. Hurricane Rita was making rapid approach to Corpus Christi and the city was under a mandatory evacuation order last summer – Mom and Dad were loading the van, in fact, and Dad and Howard had put the shutters up the day before – when the storm swerved toward Houston and New Orleans.

We take hurricane season very seriously in my family. We have been thankful each time that for us, the doors have been closed to hold back the waters just in time, though we know that for others the waves have crossed their boundaries and caused major heartache, pain, suffering, and even death.

One would imagine that the disciples, at least the four who were fishermen, took storms very seriously, as well. Every professional fisherman has encountered rain storms and wind storms in his day and the disciples were surely no exception. They fished the Sea of Galilee for a living, so for them, crossing this beautiful body of water in a boat would not have been anything out of the ordinary, even during a storm. Clearly, though, this storm was different.

The geography of the area around the Sea of Galilee is somewhat like the geography around here, where valleys are subject to sudden strong winds coming down the mountains with no warning and no visible signs. But where we tend to be on the drier side of the mountains, the Sea of Galilee is an oasis in the desert, receiving rain regularly to replenish its teeming waters. When the sudden winds from one

side of the mountains meet the rain coming off the Mediterranean, storms with strong tropical or even minor hurricane force have been known to occur. If the disciples were concerned about their welfare during the storm in today's gospel lesson, it must have been a frightful storm, indeed.

So why wasn't Jesus concerned? He was asleep, for heaven's sake! The disciples seem even more upset that Jesus is apparently oblivious and indifferent than they are about the storm. In the Greek, the word is the same for "rebuking" here as it is when Jesus rebukes demons and casts them out, so you know that the disciples are extremely upset with him.

You can almost hear Jesus sigh in frustration, can't you? Here he's been working with this group of men, teaching and healing those with faith to be healed, yet these men don't understand enough to trust that their boat will weather the storm. When Jesus commands, "Peace! Be still!", and the sea obeys, it is as clear a sign as any the disciples have seen or will see until the very end that Jesus is God incarnate.

How much more, then, must Jesus have been frustrated when the men asked each other, "Who is this, then, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

Of course, we still ask that question today, don't we?

If you've been together with your spouse, fiancée, or significant other for more than a year, raise your hand. Now, if you've never once in the entire time you've been together – never, not once! – considered leaving your other half, keep your hand up. You're either lying or a saint if your hand is still up. I'd say that you're still together because you know that the covenant on which your relationship is based is stronger than any one incident or event that might cause you to think about leaving – and it's stronger than a collection of incidents, too.

That covenant between you and your other half and God is very much like the covenant that binds us together with other congregations in the United Church of Christ. We've been married, so to speak, for 49 years today, but the sea on which our boat sails hasn't always been calm. Some of our family members have gotten out of the boat over the years because of the course we've set, while others have come into the boat because of the course we've set. We've faced stormy weather before, and we're facing it now, too.

Right from the very start on June 25, 1957, there was trouble on our sea because the new denomination was merging two very different forms of church government into one that had elements of both. The Evangelical and Reformed Church – its very name says a lot in comparison with the Congregational Christian Churches – was hierarchical and disciplined in its structure, a historical precedent set in the early 2nd century by the Roman Church and followed ever since around the world by churches of many stripes and colors. That's the heritage of this church, not just from the E&R side but from the Presbyterian, Lutheran, and Methodist sides, as well. Then there were those ornery Congregational Christians, who had this rather different idea about hierarchy called congregational

autonomy, or as someone told me at Annual Meeting a couple of weeks ago, complete anarchy, which goes back only to the Pilgrims and the Mayflower Compact here in America but farther back in England and Holland.

To illustrate this vast gulf between the two ecclesiologies, let me tell you a story I first heard in my UCC polity class. The vote to merge the Evangelical and Reformed Church of America and the Congregational Christian Churches took place on June 25, 1957. On June 26, 1957, every E&R congregation in the country either changed its name from XYZ E&R Church to XZY UCC Church OR added UCC to its name to be come XYZ E&R Church UCC. On June 26, 1957, every Congregational Christian congregation yawned, stretched, and added the contemplation of the issue to its next annual meeting to start a study process that might or might not lead to a vote to join the new denomination. Some of them are still dating us 49 years hence – we call them Schedule 1 or Schedule 2 churches and continue to pray that they will actually get off the fence someday.

We wouldn't be sailing around the storms if we were strictly hierarchical like the old E&R Church – we need only look at the Episcopalians and the Presbyterians for proof of that. We aren't strictly autonomous, either; for example, my standing as a minister isn't here at the United Church but with the Old Colony Association until I transfer it to the Juniata Association. If we were independent and fully autonomous, my authority to be your pastor would be solely at your discretion, but with our covenanted structure, my call is a partnership between the church and the association – and we would still have storms as a fully autonomous congregation, mostly over money and mission.

No, our storms are different because the only group in the United Church of Christ who can speak about issues for the United Church of Schellsburg is the United Church of Schellsburg. Penn West speaks to us in its actions and we have a voice there with our delegates and pastor, but Penn West does not speak for us any more than I would accept a husband speaking for his wife or a wife speaking for her husband. General Synod does not speak for the Penn West Conference – that's abundantly clear after the discussion at the annual meeting – nor does it speak for the Juniata Association or for the United Church of Schellsburg. General Synod speaks to us in a prophetic voice, and we all know that prophets are rarely liked and even more rarely heeded.

Witness the first major storm the UCC faced. Within a year or so of the merger, while the storm over ecclesiological differences was still brewing, the civil rights movement took center stage as the social justice issue on which the denomination cut its teeth. Despite the strong anti-slavery heritage of both founding denominations and the predecessor groups, civil rights threatened to split the new church geographically. Many churches in the south that had joined the UCC left when the first General Synods voted to support Martin Luther King, Jr., and other leaders of the Civil Rights movement and many more churches opted not to join at all. I have heard though I cannot confirm that every UCC congregation in Mississippi left the fledgling denomination during this time. Some churches that stayed despite their

unease have held the grudge, allowing their bruised feelings to fuel other storms. But Jesus said, "Peace! Be still!"; in 1962, Rev. Andrew Young went to work with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., with official UCC blessing and in 1976 the UCC became the first integrated denomination to elect an African American leader. In 1993, the UCC adopted as a guiding principal the ideal of a multiracial, multiethnic church at all levels, though many of our congregations still reflect one color back at the pastor for any number of reasons, some better than others.

Another tempest came in 1967 when the denomination endorsed selective conscientious objection – all the while supporting military chaplains. Now there's a gale force wind hitting a rain storm! In 1991, denominational leaders signed an open letter decrying the Gulf War, all the while supporting military chaplains. In 2001 and in 2003, the same thing happened. And in every case, people who were strongly against the military actions wondered why and how we could support military chaplains while folks who strongly support the military wonder how we could speak out so strongly against our soldiers. Churches with clear leanings each way withheld OCWM funds in protest. Never let it be said that we don't know how to create contradictory weather patterns! But Jesus said, "Peace! Be still!" and so we live with the tension between two seemingly diametrically opposed ideals.

Most recently, of course, General Synod voted last year to endorse the idea of marriage equality. The most recent statistics show that 98 churches have left the denomination since this vote, with 66 of those churches specifically citing the synod resolution as the key reason. 19 of these churches were from Penn West and 12 of those from the Juniata Association. Talk about a storm! But it is hardly the first time that an issue has caused a storm, nor is it the first time that sexuality and gender issues have raised winds and rain in the UCC.

The ordination of the first openly gay man, William Johnson, in 1972, raised a furor in the national setting, even though his ordination was done by his association and his local church. Twelve years later, the Massachusetts Conference took a bold step and declared itself Open and Affirming, a radical statement even in "liberal" Massachusetts, primarily because it just looks that way in Congress. Most individual UCC churches in Massachusetts are more moderate than the conference because, as with Synod, the conference serves as the prophetic voice. Even now, only 59 of the conference's 430 churches have become Open and Affirming.

In 1985, the Massachusetts Conference proposed a resolution to General Synod asking the denomination to consider itself "Open and Affirming" of the basic human rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people and full inclusion into the life of the church, including leadership at all levels of the denomination and ordination. The resolution passed, but as of this week, only 627 of the 5700 congregations in the UCC have adopted Open and Affirming status, only one in all of Penn West. We manage to live as an Open and Affirming denomination even though just 11% of our congregations bear that designation. Clearly, this discrepancy between the national prophetic voice and the local church

understanding of this call is the mark of a church without a top-down mandate! Each congregation has the right and the authority to adopt this or any other prophetic statement by Synod for itself. Only time will tell if Synod's prophecy this time is as accurate as it was when civil rights for African Americans was the thundering issue at hand.

Jesus said, "Peace! Be still!", and here we are, celebrating our 49th anniversary despite all the storms large and small.

The beauty of our odd ecclesiology is that we are uniquely suited to live together in a very sturdy, very large boat. We have seen some of our fellow travelers take whatever port appealed most to them when the storms became too difficult – but at each port, others have gotten on our big boat.

Jesus may be sleeping, but he is not disinterested in what happens on and around our big boat. As we strive to understand what his message of hope and love for all people means in a world far more diverse than the world of 1st century Palestine, he calls the seas to be still so that we may hear God's call above the waves. I do not believe that we can go wrong, as a congregation, as an association, or as a denomination, if we put love for the person first in all things. No one will fall overboard or be denied boarding if that is our focus above all else.

So here's to another 49 years of sailing on a very large boat with people we may not always agree with. As long as we remember that Jesus is with us, we'll weather the storms just fine!