

“Don’t You Care?”  
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus  
concerning Mark 4:35-41  
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco  
on June 24, 2018

I associate this story about Jesus calming the storm with contemplative prayer because I think of Jesus calming my inner storm. I have sung the chants we sang in worship today for years as a way to center myself and quiet my heart. Sometimes when my baby is crying, I sing to these chants aloud to her:

*Peace, be still. Where is your faith?  
Peace, be still. Don’t be afraid.*

*Be still and know that I am God.  
Be still and know that I am.  
Be still and know.  
Be still.  
Be.*

However, “Peace, be still,” sounds like the wrong kind of advice for these dark days when action is so needed. When so many children are still separated from their parents at the border and families are imprisoned for seeking asylum, this hardly seems the time for quiet meditation. “Be still and know that I am God,” so says the Psalmist, all the while our hearts are pounding, “Get to work! *Do* something! Don’t tell me to be still when the world is hurting!”

What does it mean to be people of prayer, people who trust, when there is so much to do? What place does the contemplative tradition have amidst these tumultuous times?

It is important to remember that in our Gospel story today, action proceeded peace. The storm was raging and the disciples went and woke Jesus up. They had to go to him and ask him to pay attention. “Don’t you care that we are perishing?” they shouted.

At youth camp this past week, we talked about the death and resurrection of Christ, and one night during worship, as part of the liturgy, the worship leader, Jared, introduced something he had experienced at an Orthodox service in Greece. During the part of the liturgy where Jesus is dead and still in the tomb, we made noise so as to wake him up. We said, “Come alive!” and then a whole room full of teenagers stomped their feet while the drummer banged on her drum and the musicians made noise on their instruments. Jared said that in Greece they swung the chandeliers that hung from the ceiling, and even old women grabbed hold of the pews and shook them. The people had a part to play in resurrecting Jesus by waking him up. We yelled and we hollered and we thought about the dead places in our lives and in our world that needed new life and we did our best to shake them back awake. “Don’t you care that you’re dead, Jesus?! Don’t you care that your people are perishing?! WAKE UP!!!”

Our particular Lake Shore style of worship is usually not quite so noisy as all that. Maybe our worship style is so prim and proper and orderly in part because we can afford for it be. We are privileged and comfortable enough that we do not feel compelled to scream our prayers. We have no need to shake God awake. We can pretty much survive whether Jesus sleeps or not.

My friend Aurelia, Pastor at Peace of Christ Church in Round Rock was telling me that ever since they hired Fran as their new worship leader, her energetic, louder style has increased the diversity in their pews—ethnic, socio-economic, and educational diversity. She said she hadn't realized how much their music mostly attracted white, middle-to-upper-class academics and left out a bunch of other people. Fran's music is theologically and intellectually rich, but it also appeals to the heart, making space for less tidy emotions and freedom of expression.

I thought that was really interesting because I am an extreme introvert, a quiet person, and someone who lives in her head more than her heart. I gravitate towards contemplative worship and contemplative prayer. Give me silence, give me chanting and stillness any day. Give me yoga, meditation, and solitude. I eat that stuff up. But lately I have been wrestling with how to reconcile my contemplative side with my activist side. Half of me is quiet stillness, looking for retreat. Half of me is raging fire, desperate to burn and do. These two sides are constantly playing tug of war and recently I've started to feel that the contemplative side of me is somewhat of a privilege. After all, I go to yoga class and private retreats because I can *afford* them. It takes money to be a contemplative—at least it costs money when you do it Kyndall-style. I retreat from the chaos because I have that option. For many oppressed persons there is no escape, no matter how temporary. In part I can occasionally achieve a still and calm heart in prayer because I am not literally fighting for my life or fighting the system to get my kids and my freedom back. Lately I've been reevaluating that.

Meditation and Centering Prayer have been a big part of my faith development, but I can also tell you that for a few years when my PTSD was at its height, I simply couldn't do it anymore, and I finally had to accept that was okay and give myself some grace. I know meditation can be very helpful for people dealing with trauma, but for me it had the opposite effect, at least for a while, and I think I know why. My MO is to repress negative emotions and a huge part of my healing has been letting those emotions surface and letting myself feel. When I would try to meditate, it was like my brain was protesting anything that might feel like further emotional suppression and I think for that season of my life, that was a good thing. My spirit knew instinctually something my practice did not—this wasn't the time for stillness. For me, this was the time to feel, to act, to heal, to change, and to speak.

As we read this passage today about Jesus calming the storm, I want us to remember that the God who calmed the sea is the same God who parted the Red Sea. Sometimes God calms and sometimes God stirs. Sometimes God hushes and sometimes God provokes. In each instance, God is responding to the cries of the people, whether it is the Israelites crying for deliverance from slavery or the disciples crying for their lives. In each case, peace is not the ultimate goal. Liberation is. Deliverance is. Sometimes God stirs up more chaos because the chaos is needed.

When the disciples approached Jesus on the boat, he did not merely meditate. The text says, "He woke up and he rebuked the wind." He woke up and he rebuked.

Look, I'm not knocking contemplative prayer—it's one of my favorite things—and I'm not criticizing quiet people because I am one. Truth be told, I tend to prefer other quiet people. But also, I am learning, there is a time to be loud. There is a time to wake up, stand up, get moving, express yourself, and feel. I also don't mean to suggest that oppressed people cannot meditate or experience contemplation or feel peace; what I am saying is that only people blinded by privilege think that inner peace is something you can maintain as some sort of spiritual achievement. God does not maintain a sense of inner peace, my friends. God weeps and rages and feels and hurts with the world, and so should we.

The worship of God should not function as a lullaby lulling us to sleep. More often than not worship should work as the trumpet horn waking us up. Music should disquiet us as much as it comforts, convict as much as it uplifts, stretch us as much as it soothes us. Sometimes God calms and sometimes God stirs. Both should happen to you on a regular basis or you haven't been to church.

How do we know when it is time to be soothed and when it is time to be galvanized? We know by listening, listening close, the way God listens. If we don't listen, we risk staying asleep to the storm.

I think about how Hope and Naz have been telling us about the immigration crisis for quite some time, but in many ways, I'm just now waking up. Why did they have to try so hard and for so long before I really heard them? I knew their story about being woken up by ICE in the early morning totally unaware there was a problem with his green card. I've heard Hope describe how the floor fell out from beneath her; I've heard Naz describe the conditions in the detention center where he remained trapped for months.<sup>1</sup> I've known that many detention centers were for-profit companies with quotas to fill, who benefit financially the more people they detain.

I even knew that children were being kept in detention centers years ago, but now I'm beginning to feel it. Now my waters are being stirred. The storm's been raging for a long time, but I've largely been dead to it. My friend Traci, a Presbyterian pastor in San Antonio has been doing this work a long time. She's visited detention centers; she's housed a mother and her son; she's helped to form the Interfaith Welcome Coalition.<sup>2</sup> I've mostly kept my distance. I can't even tell you why, other than I didn't think my life could handle one more thing.

My friend, Sharyl, preached a sermon on immigration and the Bible's mandate to show hospitality to the stranger back in 2013, but I just read it this week. She had asked some of her immigrant friends, "What did you wish people knew about being an immigrant?" and she was absolutely overwhelmed with replies. They said things like, "It's hard to keep your head up and your dignity when your education doesn't count here and you go from being a professional in one country to a low skill job here, but not because you don't have skills," and "Just because we have an accent doesn't mean we don't know or understand English well," and, "Sometimes white people think they can't learn from other cultures and races. That the Western way is the right

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<sup>1</sup> Hope and Naz Mustakim are members of Lake Shore Baptist Church. You can read more of their story at <http://www.freenaz.com/thestory>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.interfaithwelcomecoalition.org/>

way. And any idea that contradicts or moves against that is wrong or backwards or faulty or primitive or quaint. And well... that's not true.”

The quote that stood out to me the most however was this one, and remember, this is from 2013: “At the heart of immigration is separation of families. Whether it is by lottery, visa, refugee status, or other means, not everyone gets to come with you. This leaves an unspeakable chasm.”<sup>3</sup>

In more ways than one, family separation isn't new. How little I have paid heed. How little I have listened. How little I have empathized.

I take some comfort in the fact that even Jesus was asleep in the boat for a little bit. Even Jesus was dead in the grave for a few days. There's still time to wake up and come alive.

Be still all distractions that prevent me from listening. Be still every storm that seeks to consume me with petty concerns. Be still every worry that keeps me self-absorbed. Be still every voice of falsehood, every voice of insecurity that tells me I am too small to make a difference. Be still every wave of apathy rocking me to sleep! Be still every preoccupation with my own preferences and comfort. Wake me up to the plight of humanity, O God. Be still tyranny of laws that demand a lack of hospitality to the stranger. Lead us not, O Christ, into temptation but deliver us from evil, for we know that our peace is an illusion if our neighbor is not free. Wake us up so that we may care, care deeply for the stranger, the alien, and the child. Be still, O my soul, and listen to the cries of God's children. Listen, awake, stand up, and rebuke the powers of evil. O powers that oppress, be still in Jesus' name. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup>Sharyl West Loeung, “No Longer the Stranger,” <http://ubcpodcast.libsyn.com/lent-week-2-02-24-2013-sharyl-loeung>