

SERMON

June 25, 2006

“Jesus: a non-anxious presence”

According to the Gospel story this morning,  
Jesus must have been a very sound sleeper!

He’s in a small boat in the middle of the Sea of Galilee  
in the middle of the night, and a big storm has come up.  
The wind is howling, the boat is pitching and rocking,  
the water is starting to come over the sides –  
and Jesus is asleep!

The storm is so bad that the disciples  
(some of whom are fishermen and used to being out on rough seas)  
come to Jesus in alarm.  
They say, “Teacher, don’t you care that we’re perishing?”

It seems to me that you’d have to be a pretty sound sleeper  
to sleep through all that.  
It’s such a strange detail in this story  
that I think it must have some significance to it.  
Often, you know, it’s the odd details in a story  
that carry the weight of the story.

Well, Jesus is asleep in the stern of the boat  
even though the wind is blowing and there’s water everywhere.  
In the midst of the storm, Jesus is a center of calm.

And when the disciples come to him in their fear and anxiety,  
they say, “Teacher, don’t you care that we’re perishing?”  
He wakes up and rebukes the wind and says “Peace! Be still!”  
And immediately the wind stops and the sea is calm.

Now it seems to me that Jesus’ ability to calm the sea  
is somehow connected to his ability  
to sleep through the fury of the storm.

The reason he’s able to calm the storm outside  
is because he’s already calmed the storm inside himself.

His inner peace is so strong it has the power to project itself on nature.  
The disciples are amazed that he is able to calm the sea,  
but they don't give a second thought  
to his ability to sleep through the storm.  
And yet surely that was the source of his ability to calm the sea.

So it seems to me that this story is  
not just about the miracle of calming the sea;  
it's also about the power of peace in the human soul.

Look at the disciples. They come to Jesus and they say,  
"Teacher, don't you care that we're perishing?"  
They don't say, "Teacher, save us!"  
or "Teacher, start bailing!"

What they say is essentially, "How can you sleep at a time like this?  
We're afraid, we're anxious.  
The least you can do is to be as anxious as we are!"

Have you ever noticed how easily anxiety gets transmitted  
from one person to another?  
One anxious person in a group can easily set the whole group on edge.

"Father, don't you care that dirty dishes were left in the kitchen?"  
"Father don't you care that the Anglican Communion is falling apart?"  
It's amazing how one anxious person  
can change the atmosphere in an entire room of people.  
"Teacher, don't you care that we are perishing?"  
I'm sure Jesus does care,  
but his solution is not to get more upset and anxious.  
His solution is to exercise his peace and his calmness.  
"Peace, be still!"

Jesus in this story is what some family systems theorists call  
a "non-anxious presence".  
By not letting the anxiety of others get to him, Jesus brings calm.  
He brings calm to the disciples and he brings calm to the sea.

This is undoubtedly the meaning of Jesus' words to the disciples,  
"Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?"

What he's saying is that fear is the opposite of faith.  
Faith means trusting that God will care for us.

When we have faith, we have an inner peace, an inner tranquility.  
We can live without anxiety,  
And we can live without fear driving us.

I admit this is hard for me.

I seem to have an inner alarm that goes off almost constantly,  
so I live in almost constant anxiety.  
And yet I know that God calls me to faith, to trust, to peace.

In the Gospel stories, Jesus has faith.

He has complete confidence that God's plan is working.  
He knows that kingdom is at hand.  
He is close to the Father.  
He is a non-anxious presence.

And when people are around him,

they sense this non-anxious presence and it calms them down, too.  
They feel a sense of peace and inner security  
because he does not reflect their anxiety back to them.

We all have examples of someone

who has been a non-anxious presence for us.

I remember when I was a little boy in Kansas,

thunderstorms would come rolling through on summer afternoons.  
Towering thunderheads would suddenly appear,  
and the air would change from stifling hot  
to a driving wind that smelled like raindrops and electricity.

Thunderclaps would drive us inside to close the windows  
before the rain came.

Then my mother would gather us on the couch  
with a book to read to us.

I can remember the warmth of her body

and the security of her voice as the rain poured down  
and the thunder and lightning boomed around us.

My mother was being a non-anxious presence to us.

It's an important role for a parent to play.  
We teach our children that God will take care of us.  
We teach them to trust, to believe, and not to be anxious.

One of the roles of elders is to be a non-anxious presence.  
Parents and grandparents are the ones who can say,  
"It's going to be all right. God is at work.  
We don't have to be afraid.  
Peace. Be still."

Sometimes I think we should take the leaders of the world  
and put them in a room with a few grandmothers  
who could tell them to quit fighting and be at peace.

I guess God is the ultimate non-anxious presence.  
When we're anxious or fearful,  
we turn to God and we find that God is present.

God says, "You'll be OK,"  
and we feel our pulse slow down and our anxiety diminish.

Jesus was able to heal, to teach, to speak and to act  
because he had complete faith in God.  
He was a non-anxious presence,  
and as we grow in faith,  
we too become a non-anxious presence for others,  
and a force for peace and healing in our world.