

October 28, 2018

Lydia Reese

Psalm 29

Jonah 2:1-10

Mark 4:35-41

May I speak and may we all hear in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Good evening, my name is Lydia Reese, I work for A Rocha UK, a Christian conservation charity. It's good to be with you all tonight, thank you to Meghan for inviting me to speak on one of my pet topics and everyone's favorite depressing subject, climate change. When I first started to become aware of climate change as a teenager, I became somewhat militant in my lifestyle choices, and thinking back on it, I feel sorry for my family. I would follow people through the house turning off lights behind them, and any time anyone drove anywhere I would fume about fossil fuels and carbon in the atmosphere. I cycled absolutely everywhere. I was charming.

As you can probably tell, I'm from America, and if you've ever been to America you'll know that my country is just not built for cyclists! You are sometimes literally taking your life in your hands to cross the street, and now that I'm not a death-defying teenager I understand a bit better my mom's refusal to cycle to the grocery store. I still feel the same about lights left on, but I hope I'm kinder about confronting people about their habits.

My husband and I were recently in America on holiday, and we flew into North Carolina just barely ahead of Hurricane Florence, which hit coastal North Carolina. Right after we left the States, the Gulf Coast was slammed with Hurricane Michael, the third strongest recorded storm to hit US shores. I am not a climate scientist, but I understand that as a result of the changing climate, this type of storm is expected to increase in both severity and frequency. Both Florence this year and Hurricane Harvey in 2017 had higher rainfall than predicted due to warmer sea temperatures and warmer atmosphere. Climate models are predicting that coastal NC could have sea level rise of almost a meter by 2020 in certain places. The people

most likely to be affected by rising sea levels and increasingly frequent extreme weather events are those least likely to be able to deal with hurricanes because of poverty.

The beachside properties in North Carolina are beautiful and luxurious, but 30% of people living in this area have an income below the federal poverty line. They can't afford to evacuate, they can't afford to lose work just because a hurricane might make landfall near them, it might miss them by 100 miles, so they take the risk, and then we hear the stories of people trapped on rooftops, stuck in boats, killed by falling trees and ripped apart houses. In the long term, any property they own is likely to be underwater and unsellable. This is what climate change looks like in a developed, Western nation with good emergency response systems. How much worse are the effects going to be in situations without that support?

So, what is the Christian response to this? How do we react when we hear this sort of grim news, grim predictions? From other parts of Scripture, we see Jesus' repeated call to care for the poor, the marginalized in society, so certainly there's a mandate for that in this situation. However, tonight I'd like to take a closer look at Jesus' reaction to impending disaster in the passage in Mark we just heard.

This is the familiar story of Jesus calming the storm, quite a dramatic one! The disciples, fishermen, experienced sailors, encounter a storm which is so terrifying and powerful that they realize there is nothing they can do to save themselves. While they are grappling with the boat and trying to keep it from sinking, Jesus is asleep in the back, on a cushion, we are told! The disciples wake him, and he calms the storm just by talking to it. We find this story in three of the four Gospels, so it must have made quite an impression on the disciples.

We have a couple of threads I'd like to pick up on in the dialogue, in all three Gospels Jesus says to the disciples, "Where is your faith?" and in two of them asks why are they so afraid. To Jesus, the problem is not the storm, but the lack of faith. We don't need to fear because God is in control, the wind and waves will obey. The disciples had the wrong attitude, "Lord don't you care if we drown?" Mark's Gospel is the only one where the disciples ask, "Don't you care?" and Jesus comments on their lack of faith. Their focus, their response to danger is misplaced.

Contrast the disciples' response to disaster with Jonah's. Jonah was in a storm about to die, thrown into the sea, swallowed by a whale, and he responds with the beautiful prayer we just heard. Jonah has total trust in the Lord that he will redeem the situation. As Christians with the Gospel message, we believe that Jesus can redeem anything, even death. There is a parallel between Jesus and Jonah in these two storms, both are asleep, are awoken in the midst of a great storm, and are asked for an explanation by the people around them. Jonah doesn't have the power that Jesus does over the storm, but he exemplifies the faith Jesus demands in the face of destruction, as we see when he says "I said 'I have been banished from your sight, yet I will look again towards your holy temple.'"

In the light of climate change, and facts and stories about people unable to get out of the path of a hurricane, I often feel like the disciples in Mark's gospel, "Lord we are drowning, don't you care?" I am not going to be able to answer the thorny issue of suffering in the world tonight, but I am encouraged by the conclusion of the story of Jonah, where the repentance of the city of Ninevah causes God to halt their impending destruction. Jonah gets angry with God because he knew that God's wrath would turn away from the city when they repented, because God is "a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity." God does not desire our destruction, he desires our flourishing. He does care.

The challenge for us today is the challenge of the people of Ninevah. Faced with our own wrongdoing to our planet, our reaction should be sorrow, repentance, changing both our hearts and our behavior. Rather than waiting for God to sort us out and fix everything, we need to continue working for good, while maintaining the hope and the faith that God will redeem the situation, calm the storm, comfort the hurricane victims. At the end of Jonah, God says, "Ninevah has more than a hundred thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well, should I not be concerned about that great city?"

As Christians in a world facing human caused climate change, though circumstances may seem grim, we are called to change our hearts and actions for the good of the whole earth, trusting with faith that God will work all things for good.

Amen.