

Sunday, June 24, 2018
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 7 (Year B)
Job 38.1-11; 2 Corinthians 6.1-13; Mark 4.35-41
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At this point in Mark's Gospel, the disciples have not been with Jesus for very long. They've seen him cast out a demon or two, heal a few people, and heard him tell a few parables. They are really still getting to know him. But they are about to learn that life and ministry with Jesus is anything but predictable.

After a grueling schedule of teaching and healing in the area around Capernaum, Jesus is ready to move on to someplace new. And the way things are starting off is not boding well. While it's not mentioned in our Gospel reading for today, the disciples would have been absolutely shocked at Jesus' comment "Let us go to the other side," referring to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Not really a sea, but a large lake, if you go straight across from Capernaum you would land in an area known as the Decapolis. An area that was definitely Gentile territory. Has Jesus lost his mind? He wants to leave the safety of Galilee – Jewish territory – and go into an area not particularly hospitable to Jews. Who could he possibly think would be open to his teachings and healings? Nothing good could come of this.

But hey, he's the boss, so the disciples dutifully comply and get in the boat and set out across the lake. Before you know it, "A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped." Actually, not that unusual for the Sea of Galilee. Because of the geography around the Sea, it is hard to predict adverse weather. The Sea is known for having violent storms develop unexpectedly, often catching boats unawares. Peter, Andrew, James, and John, all of whom were fishermen working on the Sea of Galilee, would have been familiar with this phenomenon. Although the implication is that this storm might have been a little stronger than usual.

As we heard, Jesus was asleep in the stern of the boat as all of this was happening. The disciples, being fearful for their lives, wake Jesus up. He rebukes the wind and the sea – "Peace! Be still! – and the storm subsides. The disciples are utterly amazed. "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

One of the obvious interpretations of this scene is that Jesus even has command over the forces of nature. Jesus does what in biblical tradition only God can accomplish. To still the waters of chaos, just as God at creation stilled the waters of chaos and brought the Earth into being. But there are deeper meanings to the chaos Jesus stills. We see this in how our lectionary pairs this Gospel story with the Old Testament reading from Job and the Epistle reading from 2nd Corinthians.

We are all familiar with the story of Job. Of a man of great faith who is suddenly beset with a number of catastrophic events. Job's friends mean well and try to help him make sense out such calamity. To try to figure out why such awful things happened to a such a righteous and faithful man. This is a classic discussion of the question of theodicy – how do we make sense of

and understand the power of God in light of the suffering of the innocent? Job's friends raise stereotypical religious answers to the theodicy question, which Job rejects. To Job's credit, while his friends are trying to get Job to complain and criticize, even blame God – it will make him feel better – Job seeks to continue to be faithful.

Finally, fed up with what he is hearing come out of the mouths of Job's friends, the Lord chimes in, with the response we heard today. An expression of Divine displeasure – albeit a bit sarcastic – that essentially says that us mere mortals cannot presume to know the mind of God or even fathom how God operates. That all one can do is rest in the mysterious power of God. So knock it off and instead, follow Job's example. The determination to remain faithful, even in the midst of adversity.

While we reject the idea that God causes bad things to happen to people – that is not how God operates – the thing we do embrace about the story of Job is his example of being faithful to God, no matter what. Even when things are tough and when it would be so easy to blame God or to feel that God has abandoned us. In fact, what we see in today's part of the story, the Lord shows up in the midst of the chaos. It is not insignificant that Job encounters the Lord in a whirlwind – in a storm. While such a storm is an Old Testament image for the presence of God, it also is representative of just where Job is in his own life. In the midst of a storm of personal crisis and chaos. And in the midst of this personal chaos, God chooses the same image – a storm – as the means of coming to Job. Showing that the Lord chooses to come to Job in the midst of his personal the crisis and chaos. That this is precisely when God shows up. In times of storm and chaos. When we need him most. And as the rest of the story beyond today's reading bears out, God does eventually heal and restore Job to wholeness. And even more.

Then there is the Epistle reading, in which Paul writes to the church in Corinth. As a means of encouragement to them during a time of chaos and uncertainty in their own life as a faith community, Paul shares the hardships he has faced in his own life and ministry. A list of physical, emotional, and spiritual struggles. And his message to them is that even in the midst of these struggles, he remained faithful to God and to Jesus Christ. It was precisely because he was faithful that Paul managed to come through his hardships. He conveys this using language from the Prophet Isaiah: "Now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!" Words that originally spoke of the promise of return from exile. Paul intentionally uses these words – this image of liberation and hope – to convey that same promise to the Corinthians. He is telling them that, from his personal experience, he knows firsthand that God's salvation arrives in the very moments when storm and chaos threaten to overcome us.

Paul ends this section by saying "open wide your hearts also." While directly urging the Corinthians to engage in the work of forgiveness and reconciliation – as this was what was needed in their own communal crisis – the underlying message is that the willingness to work for these is born out of faithfulness to God. And that in their faithfulness, God will be with them and be part of the healing they need.

So, with this as the supporting material for the Gospel, back to the storm on the Sea of Galilee. We see that the stormy conditions portrayed are merely a physical image of something deeper. In the ancient Near East, water and wind together symbolized chaos and disorder in all its

forms. And even more so, as one commentator noted, “The storm itself symbolizes the forces of chaos and fear—in the world and in our lives—that are brought under subjection by God’s redemptive action” (*Synthesis*, Proper 7, June 24, 2018).

In the midst of the storm and the chaos that ensues, the disciples are able to call upon Jesus. They don’t need to wait for him to show up in the time of chaos. He is already with them, asleep. This is a poignant image of trust in God. Of Jesus’ faithfulness and ability to rest in the presence of God, no matter what may be going on around him. “Jesus is the only one in the boat with the faith, courage, and presence of mind to remain calm in the midst of a raging storm. He knew no fear because of his profound faith in the Father’s will” (*Synthesis*, Proper 7, June 24, 2018). And Jesus immediately and directly engages the storm and the chaos out of his faithfulness. He converses with the chaos directly. “Peace! Be still!”

The disciples are amazed at what Jesus does. They begin to see him in a new and different light. They begin to recognize that he is the Son of God. And they begin to learn something about the power of faithfulness. Sometimes, chaos – no matter how messy or disorienting – provides us with opportunities to see God in new ways. Ways that, like for Job and for Paul, brings the promise of salvation and healing.

When we are faced with those personal storms in our own lives, those things and situations that are unknown, challenging, difficult, or even threatening, it is easy to despair. It is easy to lose hope. Our readings for today show us that in times of personal crisis and chaos, we are given a choice. We can respond in fear or we can respond in faith.

This week I saw the movie “First Reformed.” It is about a minister who is struggling with his own personal storms and chaos – physical health, relationship issues, and theological questions. Early in the movie, Reverend Toller is counseling a young man who is also struggling with his own personal storm. He tells the young man, “Courage is the answer to despair.” This statement troubled me. “Courage is the answer to despair.” There may be some truth to that, but I think that for us as followers of Christ, there is something else. Faith is the answer to despair. And it is in our faith that we find the courage to continue on. It is in our faith that we find the courage to let God be God and to let Jesus be Jesus, and to invite them into our crisis and chaos, into our pain. To allow them the opportunity to proclaim “Peace! Be still!” To the storms in our lives and to the despair and hopelessness we can feel at those times in our lives.

Jesus proved his willingness to do this through his life and ministry, and through his death. And he continues to prove it. Scripture tells us that Jesus loved us so much that he was willing to go to the cross, to give his life to shatter the bonds of sin and death, to break the despair, hopelessness, and fear that so often beset the whole world. The promise made to us is that the risen Christ still loves us, still cares about us. And that in that love, he continues to be present in the storms of human experience. If we put aside the fear and instead call on him in faith, he will be there, proclaiming “Peace! Be still!”