

Through the Storm

Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32; Mark 4:35-41

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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I've been writing online for over fourteen years now. I'm creeping up on 1400 blog posts. This is an awful lot of words to have inflicted upon the internet.

One of the interesting things about having that much stuff online is to see how posts "behave" over time.

Some posts generate a bit of traffic and conversation in the days immediately after I write them, but then pretty much fade into digital oblivion. And by "some," I mean "the overwhelming majority."

Others will occasionally flare up from time to time. When there's some kind of tragedy in the news, for example, some of what I've written on the problem of evil and suffering will get a boost in traffic.

And so, occasionally, I will get a little notification on my phone indicating that there is a new comment on something I've written years and years ago. This week, it happened again.

Eight years ago, I wrote a blog post about how my then eleven-year-old son — who, incredibly, turned twenty, two days ago! — told me that sometimes he was afraid of God. He had been reading a particularly disturbing story from the book of Genesis.

I'm not going to re-tell the story here, but it's the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah from Genesis 19. It is a bewildering mixture of sex and violence and general depravity. It's a story where God seems pretty angry and inscrutable, truth be told. You're welcome to read it later (don't say I didn't warn you!).

At any rate, Nick had read this strange story and felt a little afraid of God. What kind of God acts like this? Allows this? Is involved in these kinds of disturbing stories?

It led to a good talk. I patiently and persuasively answered all of his questions with luminous wisdom and clarity then we moved on with the rest of our days. Ahem.

If only it were that easy. ☺

What I in *fact* told him was that I had similar questions, that the life of faith isn't about always getting all the answers we want, about how the Bible is an unfolding story where the character of God is revealed more fully over time.

I hope I at least gave him the sense that his questions were good and important and part of the life of faith.

And then, as I am wont to do after such experiences, I went off and wrote a blog post about it. What else would I do? I gave it the title "Sometimes I'm Afraid of God."

I didn't know then that this would be the kind of title that would guarantee fairly consistent traffic over the next eight years. The words "I'm afraid of God" are, evidently, words a lot of people type into Google.

And thus, the comment this week. "You didn't answer the question." the commenter said. "In my experience with fathers I have had four of them and they all abused me sexually and physically and verbally and they had no patience."

I try to handle comments like this carefully. There is real pain behind the keyboard, not just a comment to be "dealt with." This person needed a flesh and blood human being, a pastor, a therapist, a wise friend. Not some random blogger on the internet.

But I also know that I have to say *something*. These are not the kinds of comments you just leave hanging there. The person on the other end is reaching out for some kind of connection in the midst of their pain.

I expressed my sorrow at what this person had experienced. And then I said, "Which question are you referring to? Which question did I not answer?"

The response was almost immediate. It came in all caps. The anger almost leapt through the screen.

THIS IS THE QUESTION! How do I stop being afraid of our Father? A life time of anger and abuse! Until I was 33, I'M 54 now! You have NO IDEA and you wouldn't believe me if I told you!NO YOU WOULDN'T.
NOBODY DOES.

It struck me as a cry of anguish from a wounded animal.

I thought of this comment this week when I read our text from Mark's gospel. Jesus has been teaching all day. Evening has come and he his disciples have set out on the sea of Galilee to cross the other side.

A furious storm comes up. Jesus, inexplicably, stays asleep.

His disciples shake him awake and say, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

These words spoken by frightened disciples on a stormy sea could be the words of anyone who is suffering or in fear or facing a trial or is lost and can't find the way home or is mired in addiction or who finds themselves in any circumstance that they can't control and can't see a way out of.

Jesus. Don't you care?! I'm on the edge here! I don't know if I'm going to make it! I thought faith was supposed to make a difference! Where are you when I need you?! Why are you sleeping at precisely the moment I need you to come to my rescue?!

This is the cry that I heard in the comment section of my blog post this week. Nobody understands what I've been through, what I'm going through! Nobody cares! Especially not the one who could do something about it!

Jesus, don't you care?!

There is very little that hurts worse than feeling alone, abandoned. We human beings can endure a great many frightful and difficult things in this world if we believe that we are cared for and understood. When these things are taken away, we easily lose all perspective and go to some dark places.

One commentator I read this week put it like this:

The problem isn't fear; the problem is where fear leads. When I face fearsome circumstances, my go-to position is not trust or even curiosity; it's full-on suspicion. In my fear, I conjure up a God who is stony-faced, implacable, and loveless. A God to whom I am expendable. A God who withdraws. Once I've conjured that God, I withdraw, too. I curl up tight and focus on mere survival, convinced that I'm alone. All capacity for reflection disappears.¹

¹ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=3045>

I suspect many of us resonate with this. I think the person who commented on my blog this week almost certainly felt like this.

I responded the best I was able. I told them that there was little that I could say as an anonymous person on the Internet that could make any dent in the kind of pain they had experienced.

I told them that they were right. I *don't* have any idea what it is like to experience a lifetime of abuse.

I pointed them toward the parable of the prodigal son for a different portrayal of how God the Father views and loves his children.

I spoke of my conviction that Jesus gives us the truest portrayal of what God is like than anything we read in earlier parts of the story.

I don't know if it helped or not. This particular blog post has now faded back into digital oblivion.

In our story from Mark 4, Jesus does what we all wish he would do for each and every one of the storms we encounter in our lives.

He stands up and commands the wind and the waves to be still. And, miraculously, they are.

It echoes the creation story from Genesis 1 where the Spirit of the Lord hovers over the water and brings creative order and goodness out of the formless chaos.

It echoes the Psalm we heard earlier in our service:

Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he brought them out from their distress; he made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed.

This is what we all long for, isn't it? For miraculous deliverance from that which threatens us. For the One who stronger than us to banish that which makes us feel vulnerable and afraid.

We want Jesus to stand up and calm the storms of our lives decisively and finally, leaving no doubt whatsoever about who is in charge.

Sometimes this happens. Thank God. I know some of you have had these experiences. You've told me about them. The burden suddenly lifted. The way forward suddenly made clear. The longed-for pregnancy suddenly a reality. The fog of doubt and fear suddenly lifted. Impossibly good news after a bleak diagnosis.

For those instances where God decisively intervenes in our storms, we should give grateful praise. We must never give up praying for these things.

But the more common experience is that the storms remain with us. I doubt this is news to you. I think far more of you would tell stories about praying for a miracle. And waiting. And waiting. And watching. And watching. And the storm rages on.

Is Jesus asleep? Uncaring? Has he abandoned us to our storms?

And, perhaps the most important question of all: Are we to equate the ongoing presence of the storm with God's absence?

Not surprisingly, I think the answer to this last question is a resounding "no!"

I don't think that this story from Mark's gospel is laying down a template about what all Christians at all times should expect when they are facing the storms of life.

I think this story is primarily about declaring the identity of Jesus. It is about demonstrating that Jesus is indeed the embodiment of Yahweh himself, showing that this humble rabbi is—
incredibly!—the very same one who brought order out of chaos in the beginning.

This story is more about who Jesus *is* than about what Jesus will always *do* in our lives and in the world.

It takes place at a very particular time and place in God's story and for a very particular purpose. It is embedded in his announcement that the kingdom of God had come near, that God was marking a decisive turn in the long story of his relationship with his people and all of creation.

Perhaps you might think this is just the preacher taking the easy way out. I should be saying, "If only we had a little more faith, we might experience the miracles of Jesus more often than we do." Far easier to hide behind, "Well, you see, this was just a story for that time and place, not for today."

I get this critique. I really do. And as I've said, I think we really must continue to pray and believe that God can and does remain an active, miracle-working presence in our world today.

But the inconvenient truth to the “More faith = less suffering in the world” view of faith is that Jesus and his followers would all face storms in their lives. None were exempt from suffering.

Jesus did not miraculously exempt his earliest followers from the storms of life, and we should not expect this either.

He told his followers (and us) this explicitly: “In this world you *will* (not “might”) have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

The church’s witness throughout history has come out of suffering not in its absence. At our best, we have always borne witness to a God who, in Christ, knows what it is to suffer, and who promises to always be working to bring light out of darkness.

And so, the task of faith is to pray for God to still the storm, yes, *and also* to trust in and to seek out his presence in the midst of the storm.

The commentator I quoted earlier puts it beautifully:

[I]n Mark’s story of the storm, the obvious (but wholly overlooked) fact is that Jesus is just as present in the raging water as he is in the soothing calm that follows. Despite the disciples’ inability to perceive it, there is no point in the night when God is absent or even distant. In that vulnerable boat, surrounded by that swelling, terrifying water, the disciples are in the intimate company of Jesus. He rests in their midst, tossed as they are tossed, soaked as they are soaked.

I think I will spend the rest of my life seeking this one grace—the grace to experience God’s presence in the storm. The grace to know that I am accompanied by the divine in the bleakest, most treacherous places. The grace to trust that Jesus cares even when I’m drowning. The grace to believe in both the existence and the power of Love even when Jesus “sleeps.” Even when the miraculous calm doesn’t come.

Can we, too, seek this one grace? To believe and trust that the One sometimes calms the storm is also the One who is present, caring, and active in the midst of it?

I want to close with a story that suggests one way we might think of this in our own lives. It comes from a few years ago when I was volunteering at the jail.

I remember encountering a tough-looking young man, his brown skin marked with tattoos, his black hair slicked back over the middle of a mostly shaved skull, a rosary around his neck.

His story was a hard, if familiar one. Alone since age eleven, abusive and absent parents, violence, substance abuse, confusion, neglect, a string of unhealthy relationships.

And then, his girlfriend gave birth to a stillborn child. Something snapped inside of him. He descended into a spiral of rage and alcohol and hard drugs that landed him in jail. He still struggled to sleep, he said. He couldn't get that image out of his head.

He stared at the floor and talked about how well-meaning people in his life always told him to believe in and pray to God.

“The thing is, I prayed and I prayed, but I never heard from God. And how could God take our baby like that? What kind of God... That was my child, my little girl...” His voice trailed off.

Jesus, don't you care...?

Another inmate looked up and said, “Brother, thank you. If you ever need someone to talk to, just come find me. I'm usually in the laundry room...”

You're not alone. Someone cares.

Sometimes the care of God comes to us via one another.

He didn't look up, but he nodded. He sniffled a bit and said, “So, I been here for a few months and I'm feeling a little less angry. I try to pray. I took one of them bibles and I read the whole thing in four days. I think I get it, or some of it, anyway. It kinda makes sense. I don't know if I can believe in God. I guess I'm kinda on the edge or the outside. But I wanna open my heart.”

That simple phrase has never left me since. *I wanna open my heart.*

I thought of that famous story of Jesus healing the boy who was possessed by the evil spirit, when the father says, “Lord I believe, help my unbelief” (Mark 9:23).

This is in many ways one of the deepest cries of faith.

I wanna open my heart.

I wanna believe that no matter what storms I face in life, Jesus is present and working.

I wanna open myself to the One whom even the wind and the waves still obey. I wanna believe that Jesus still calms storms.

I wanna believe that sometimes storms can draw us closer to God and his purposes in our life.

I wanna believe that Jesus is never asleep, even when it might seem like it.

I wanna believe that God cares, even when it seems like I'm alone.

I wanna open my heart to the One who says, "Peace be still. Why are you afraid?"

Sometimes the wanting is the first step.

I pray that we as a church can be a place and a people where hearts that wanna stay open can find refuge. I pray that we as a church can be a place and a people that trusts God through the storm.

Amen.

