

Wesley United Methodist Church

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Title: Stilling the Storm

Scripture: Mark 4:35-41

The torrential rain and the vicious wind made it difficult to make headway. The waves tossed the boat around. Huddled under the tarpaulin trying to stay relatively dry and warm there was no conversation. Memories of the morning sunshine, breakfast on the beach, and bike riding around Block Island had vanished. I don't know what the others were thinking, but I, for one, was afraid that we might not make it back to the mainland.

I prayed fervently that God would guide the hand, mind and skill of the experienced lobsterman friend who knew the waters, and knew his boat and, it seemed, held our lives in his hands as he tried to navigate through the sudden storm. I'd love to tell you that I was calm and confident that God would see us through, but I wasn't. However, the storm was great for my prayer life. For what seemed like hours, although I'm sure it wasn't that long, I prayed and prayed and prayed. While I felt afraid, I did not feel panic.

Interestingly, I don't remember ever discussing this trip with our friend. I don't know if he was as afraid as I was, or if I was over re-acting. It really doesn't matter, because in the middle of the storm, all that really seems to matter at that very moment, is what you are feeling.

In Mark's Gospel, we just heard about a similar storm. The experienced fishermen were afraid. They knew how to handle their boat, but the sudden storm was overwhelming. They were afraid that their boat would capsize. They fished these waters all the time, but on the Sea of Galilee a storm was nothing to take lightly. The Sea, or perhaps more

properly a lake, is 13 miles long and 7 miles wide. At its deepest point it is only 150 feet deep. But it is a basin in the middle of mountains and hills.

A few years ago, I had the opportunity to be in a boat on that Sea. The water was so calm that we were able to sit in one place for quite a while, stopping the engine for a worship service. It was glorious, peaceful, and beautiful. But the peaceful calm can quickly become transformed by a violent storm. Winds tunnel through the hills to the east and west and quickly stir up the water. The winds become violent when they come off the hills of the Golan Heights to the east. For fishermen, trapped on the sea in a storm like that, it can quickly become deadly. In March of 1992, a storm sent waves 10 feet high, crashing into downtown Tiberias and causing significant damage.ⁱ

In the middle of the storm, Jesus, exhausted, was sleeping despite the wind, waves, and violent rocking of the boat. Imagine for a moment, being one of the fishermen trying to control that boat. Despite their skill, they were afraid, and in their fear, they looked to someone to save them. They were astonished that Jesus, who had spent the day teaching from their boat, was fast asleep. How dare he sleep! Didn't he care about what was happening to them?

They woke him, accusing him of not caring about them. At this point, they probably didn't think Jesus could do anything about the storm, but he should at least be awake with them.

We can understand that feeling, can't we? In the middle of a sudden storm in life, we want our friends to be there with us. We want to know that they care. We don't want to face the fear alone. If our family or friends stop coming around, stop calling us, we start to think that they don't care.

The men in the boat with Jesus cared about him and knew that he cared about them. But this was still early in his ministry, and they were still getting to know him, trying to figure out who he was and what he could do.

To their amazement, Jesus spoke to the wind and the sea and suddenly the storm was over and there was a dead calm. They were shocked, amazed, and asked each other, “Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

When we face a storm in our lives, we would certainly welcome a miraculous calming of the storm. If you are anything like me, you have also prayed for those miraculous events. Probably we have all heard of people who have experienced a miraculous healing. Following any natural disaster, we often hear a story about one house that was untouched, or one person who was in a different place than they would normally be and so was miraculously spared. These stories are frequently accompanied by the person saying, that God surrounded and protected their home, or God delayed them from their normal routine and saved their life.

We simply cannot speak with enough authority to say whether God intervened to save a particular house or person. However, if we pair that with Jesus’ question to the disciples, “Why are you frightened, don’t you have faith yet?” we are in danger of believing that God protects people with a certain level of faith and not people with a different level of faith. When I hear a person professing that God saved their house, or their life while others died, I want to ask, “if we are then to believe that God destroyed the homes of all the others or refused to save their lives.” Let me be clear that I am speaking for myself here, but I think we are walking into a mine field when we start to think that way and personally, that is not how I understand God’s actions.

I know that there are some very vocal religious leaders who proclaim exactly that. We heard proclamations that the 9/11 attack, Hurricane Katrina, a devastating earthquake in Haiti and numerous other events were orchestrated by God to punish us for a variety of actions including tolerance or acceptance of homosexuality, and liberal civil rights activities. I do not believe that for one minute. But sometimes people looking for an explanation for why something happens find it easier to blame God than to look for other explanations or to believe that some things simply happen for reasons we do not understand.

Sometimes it is easier for people to believe that God caused something to happen for some greater reason than it is to accept that God didn't step in and prevent it from happening. We may wonder why God doesn't miraculously stop the storms of our lives, but we can be assured that God is not sleeping. God does care about what happens in our lives, but in general, I believe that God does not walk into our lives like a puppeteer pulling the strings and changing what is happening.

There was one particular time when I felt that my life was falling apart. I begged with God. I pleaded with God to step in and make the problem go away, to restore the relationship, and make everything as if it had never happened. I walked out of this sanctuary that night planning to never come back if God didn't act. God didn't wave a magic wand and suddenly make all the problems go away. I do believe, however, that God did answer my prayers, but not in the way I had decided they should be answered.

Instead, I believe that God walked that path with me. God led me to individuals who also walked with me. I have come to understand that even if God had somehow waved a magical wand and fixed things, or turned

back the clock to a different time, if behaviors and attitudes had not changed, the situation would once again deteriorate. Instead, God worked through others, through time, through me, and a different future, became the new reality; a different future that has been a blessing, and celebration, and for which I give thanks.

I believe that God created us with free will and that God wants us to be all that we can be, but that path comes about gradually one day and one decision at a time. I believe that when we turn to God and seek God's help, God will answer our prayers, but not always in the way that we think they should be answered. If that were the case, then God would not be God, but rather we would be controlling God without understanding the consequences.

Some of you might remember the movie "Bruce Almighty". In that movie, the title character is given all of God's powers for a time. In a romantic gesture, he draws the moon closer to impress his girlfriend. Unknown to him, this unusual lunar activity, triggered a tsunami half way around the world. When he started answering everyone's prayer by simply saying "yes", he discovered that there were numerous unintended consequences that among other things eventually led to riots in the streets.

In life, things are connected, and actions have consequences that we often cannot foresee or control. It would be impossible, even for God, to answer all of our prayers the way we want them to be answered. The reality is that some of us are praying for things that are directly contradictory to what others are praying for; things more complicated than the simple and obvious which team will win the World Series or the Super Bowl.

I think we can all agree that one of the storms raging around us right now is the storm of immigration. For some the answer to prayer would be for people to stop trying to cross our borders, and the way to answer that prayer is to build a wall, separate children from parents at the border, return people to the countries from which they originally came regardless of how long they have been here, etc. Many others remind us that the Bible calls us to care for immigrants and strangers, remembering that we are all immigrants, pray and work for humane treatment, safety for children and families and a path to citizenship for dreamers. Still others are in different places along the spectrum of how to respond to the immigration storm. In this case, there is no simple way to say, “Be Still” and calm this storm. Dealing with this storm will require hard work on the part of all of us as we seek to be faithful to God, to understand the storm and its complex ramifications.

The reality is that into all of our lives, storms will come. The question is what we do when we are in the middle of the storm. How do we survive the storm?

Jesus asked the Disciples, “Why are you frightened? Do you not have faith yet?” Faith does not take away the storms, or protect us from the troubles and dangers of life. What faith does is to help us face them without fear or with less fear than if we thought we were facing them alone. It doesn’t mean that we are completely calm when the Doctor uses the word cancer. My friend Kelly, who was diagnosed with leukemia shortly before Christmas, has faced months of chemotherapy, a recent a stem cell transplant and returned home this week. She has been and continues to be in the middle of a horrible storm but she has been able to face all of this with a courage and faith that comes from knowing that God is holding her

hand and walking with her and that she is surrounded by a community of faith who care for her, pray for her, support and encourage her.

You remember the journey you walked with Pastor Jean, and her proclamation that, “If you have faith, you have everything.” Even though Jean was not cured of the cancer that wracked her body, she knew that God was still with her in the storm, and even when death came, she had confidence that she would be gathered into God’s loving and secure arms.

Sadly, not everyone is able to see God’s presence in the middle of the storms in this way. When God does not answer their prayer in the way they want it to be answered, some accept the word of others that they did not have enough faith or the right faith. There are some who believe that it means that God doesn’t care, and so they reject God. There are some who believe they want nothing to do with a God who would allow a good person like Pastor Jean to die. There are some for whom a prayer not answered the way we would like it to be answered creates a crisis of faith.

Storms are natural, and they will come into our lives. Faith does not protect us from storms, troubles, danger, but we know that ultimately nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Jesus does care and because we know God’s love, it is up to us to love others and share God’s love so that they may experience God’s love through us when they may not be able to see God for themselves.

There are storms in all of our lives. Sometimes, our health is a concern. Sometimes it is fear for the future. What will we do when our employer tells us our job is being eliminated; what will we do when we face retirement – will we have enough to live on? Sometimes the storms are danger in our homes, food insecurity, or turbulent relationships. Our denomination is in the middle of a storm about inclusiveness. Storms are

raging throughout our nation and other nations all around the world in the areas of immigration, economics, trade, and diplomacy, just to mention a few.

The disciples were overwhelmed by the chaos of the physical storm raging around them and took refuge in fear. When we find the storms of life raging around us, we can call on Jesus to stand by us. As we sang a few minutes ago, “What a friend we have in Jesus, ... what a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer. O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry, everything to God in prayer.... Are we weak and heavy laden, cumbered with a load of care? Precious Savior, still our refuge; take it to the Lord in prayer.”ⁱⁱ

Let us pray: Mighty God who calmed the storm, help us to know your presence with us in the middle of the storms in our lives. When we are afraid, help us to turn to you for comfort, courage, and strength. Help us to know that you answer prayer in many ways and that often we can be part of your answer to prayer for someone else. Give us the faith to know that nothing, not even the biggest storm, can separate us from your love. Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.bibleplaces.com/seagalilee/>

ⁱⁱ “What A Friend We Have in Jesus” UMH #526