

4th Sunday of Pentecost
Sermon 6.20.21

Job 38:1-11

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: ‘Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

‘Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb?— when I made the clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band, and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors, and said, “Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped”?

Mark 4:35-41 (David Bentley Hart’s interpretation)

And on the day, when evening had come, he says to them, “Let us cross over to the far shore.” And dismissing the crowd they take him, as he was in the boat, and other boats were with him. And a great windstorm arose, and the waves broke into the boat, so that now the boat was filling. And he was sleeping on the pillow in the stern. And they rouse him and say to him, “Teacher, does it not matter to you that we are perishing?” And, being woken, he rebuked the wind and said to the sea, “Be silent, quell yourself!” And the wind fell and a great calm came about. And he said to them, “Why are you so afraid? How is it you do not have faith?” And they were afraid, enormously afraid, and said to one another, “Who then is this man, that even the wind and sea obey him?” (317)

When the boys were babies and they would cry, I’d remember something someone once told me, which made their crying tolerable to me. This sound that was otherwise the worst sound in the world, their crying also indicated they could advocate for themselves. Though it meant they were uncomfortable past what *they* could tolerate, though it meant I had to do something in response, and often at a time when I was myself was very nearly spent, it also meant they could advocate for themselves, and that is a very good thing indeed.

I remember this partly because I’d once watched a friend of mine, a child psychiatrist, meet for the first time a foster baby another friend of mine was making moves to adopt. This was at a wedding, not in a clinical setting. My doctor-friend held the baby along with anyone else who wanted in—which was a lot of people because *holding a baby*. Am I right? And this baby went along, hardly a squawk. “He’s such a good baby!” people might even have said, so impressed.

But this isn’t necessarily a sign of “good baby,” whatever that means.

My doctor-friend commented later that it had actually made him sad to see. Six months old, this baby never once objected to all this stimulation, never over this whole long event even

cried. He seemed to my friend to have lost that capacity, the capacity to advocate for himself. It was almost as if he'd given up—as if he himself believed he wasn't worth advocating for, and as if he knew, and maybe from experience, that no amount of advocacy would result in response, to say nothing of compassionate response.

I don't know what's become of that baby, who'd be in his 20s by now. I've lost track of all three of those people.

I hope he learned to cry out when he needed something.

This incident in the boat presents all sorts of problems—not least that those who cried out for help come down to us as the faulty ones in story.

At least Jesus didn't say to his disciples, "Gird up your loins like men!"

Notice, actually, that he didn't.

Nevertheless, problems here abound—Jesus, the disciples, an armada of small boats set away from the shore where Jesus had been teaching in parables. (The one about the sower. The one about the growing seed. The one about the mustard seed). This recalled incident presents with all sorts of problems, beginning with Jesus having suggested that they all head out across the sea, go to the other side.

The movement itself shouldn't take us by surprise at this point. Jesus according to Mark is, after all, remembered as on the move. All the time, on the move.

It's often taken to underscore how very *active* Jesus was in his itinerant ministry, that he was less a teacher than an event, an occurrence.

It also suggests, to me at least, that he meant to change his perspective a lot. He would be inside, then would move outside. He would be here, and then would go over there, to the other side, to another place. First, he was in Capernaum, the Jewish side of the Sea of Galilee. Then, following this incident while at sea, he would arrive in Gerasa, the Gentile side of the Sea of Galilee. It's as if he wanted to see the world from within, and then the world from beyond; to see the world from the center of things and then the world from the outer edge. It's like he needed a fuller perspective on the world, an ever-changing perspective on the world.

This world: what was it that he had come to liberate? This world: it's as if he himself needed to figure what it was he'd come to ransom from the occupying force it had become captive to.

That has an impact, such movement from within to beyond, from the center to the edge—a deep sense of orientation coupled with a daily experience of disorientation, reorientation.

Once, on a rowing trip to Delaware, at the end of a long day on the water, I sat watching the sun set over the ocean. It was a peaceful moment until it finally occurred, with no small measure of fear: what was I doing in North America watching the sun set over the Atlantic? What had happened? Something terrible had happened! Along came someone I'd just met, a rower from the region, and when I jerked to sudden awareness, she explained we were on a little cape, and the sun was making it so we couldn't see the continental shore, though it *was* there, not far off.

They say, with the Gospel of Mark, you have to preach the questions—like, “Does it not matter to you that we are perishing?” and “Who is this man, that even the wind and sea obey him?” and, by implication, “What is the world you came to save?” or, more basically put, “What’s going on here?” or “What just happened?” It’s a disorienting experience, this Jesus according to Mark.

He had suggested that they cross over to the far shore, that distant land of the Gentiles. It was his suggestion, though a storm was coming, and a big storm at that, which he might have known, they *all* might have known if they'd just looked at the sky or felt the air around them. You can usually sense such things as a coming storm—especially a big storm.

And this lake is low—the lowest in the world, two hundred feet below sea level in fact. And the land that surrounds is treeless, lots of sky. They could have seen a storm coming, even a storm *brewing*, don't you think?

And big it was, this storm. When it hit, it immediately began to swamp the boat.

But Jesus, having fallen asleep, remained asleep. Even the storm's jostling and overwhelming didn't wake him.

That seems hard to believe.

And not only because the size and impact of the storm would certainly have jostled someone awake, but also because it can't have been that long that Jesus was asleep, hardly so long that he could be *sound* asleep. It's just not that big a sea. It's actually more of a lake, Lake Tiberias, as it's more often called. Sixty-four square miles, it's eight miles east to west, eleven miles north to south. Not that big

So, Jesus was tired.

Okay, very tired.

It's still hard to conceive of him having fallen asleep so deeply in so short a time and in such rough conditions that an overwhelming storm wouldn't wake him.

It strains credulity.

The thought occurs: maybe what we're dealing with here in this story is a parable. That's what came up at Bible study this week: maybe Jesus, having spoken in parables, was now engaging in parable. He'd ushered the disciples into living a parable.

This isn't to say he was performing some act, and it isn't to say this story is of an event that "didn't really happen." It's to say that engaging with Jesus is itself to walk into a parable—an encompassing, disorienting experience that suggests the truth, luffs it, flapping it loose, teasing it out from this blunt world of established fact and sure perception.

Because, you know, right? You know what the take-away of this story is, right? The disciples were weak in faith, and that was bad, and that's what made the storm insurmountable. Jesus, by contrast, was strong in faith, and that was good, as evidenced in his rebuking the storm, which had the effect of calming the storm. The takeaway, then: don't be like the disciples who were weak in faith but be like Jesus who was strong in faith.

The thing is Mark's presentation of Jesus seems to emphasize his singularity. He was singular in his making manifest the kingdom of God, singular in his making to occur the reign of God. The effect he had on this tired old world: it was immediate, and it was singular. The effect he had on the negative aspects of this world—the unholiness of torment, the unrighteousness of worldly power, the offensiveness of sickness, the offensiveness of storms that loom and destroy: this was unlike what anyone else could effect.

The problem with Jesus as Mark presents him is that we really, mostly *can't* be like Jesus.

Besides that, Jesus' strength of faith was actually a problem in this event that Mark recalls. I mean, if it was this that made him so soundly rest assured that all shall be well when indeed all was not well, all in fact was very dangerous, then this strength of faith was very much a problem.

Consider, the danger this armada of small vessels was in was real. Water was coming over the gunnels, such that it was starting to fill the boat. And when boats take on water, they risk sinking, a risk that goes from possible to probable to actual very quickly. The disciples recognized this risk, this probability. Their so-called fear, then; their so-called lack of faith: it's this that had them advocate for themselves, *ad-vocare* meaning to call to. (Incidentally, this is one name for the Holy Spirit: the Advocate, the *paraclete*, according to Jesus in the Gospel of John, to call to.)

For this, of course, Jesus did act, which perhaps saved not only the disciples but also himself from accidental death. The disciples calling out for Jesus is what had him at last act. So, it was the disciples' weakness of faith that actually saved the day.

It bears saying here that the action Jesus took was to rebuke the storm. He rebuked it just as he had rebuked a demon who possessed a man in his first remembered healing, and just as he would rebuke Peter when Peter had rebuked him at his saying he must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. Each of these provoked in Jesus the same response—a rebuking. Each of these—the demon, which is to say an occupying presence, a thing destructive in a man who needed to be freed of this occupation; and an attempt on Peter’s part to sway Jesus from his path to the cross, an insistence on Peter’s part that Jesus’ priority rather be to save his own skin; and now this, a storm, a thing of nature, the sort of thing that simply happens in the world, and often to much destruction, but without which the creation would fall into the doldrums, which any sailor can tell you is maybe worse: he rebuked them all.

It’s almost as if Jesus objects to something fundamental at work here, something indeed fundamental in the world, to the world. Something here is deeply wrong, in the words of one poet of one poem I couldn’t lay my hands on.

A family friend is battling cancer. It’s in remission now. And he’s the kindest man in the world, I tell you. And he’s faced some serious headwinds in life: a frustrating childhood, a risky adolescence, anxiety as an adult, injury and addiction. Now he’s a family man, a wife, three kids, runs a small business. He’s the best, and he got cancer, and it pisses me off. His wife, a much milder sort than I, is moving through it all with equanimity, even an up-beat about her. I’ve told her, with whom I closer, “Well, I’m pissed.”

She’ll allow it.

“Does it not matter to you that we are perishing?”

This world, great God, to which you came in Christ, does it not matter that you didn’t make it all better?

This world, where storms and viruses and unholiness all wreak havoc; this world, to which you came so to manifest your holy realm, so to set to flight all that is not right: does it not matter that storms and viruses and unholiness still have their way?

I don’t sail. I stopped doing that when I was about six years old and we, my family, got caught on the ocean in a squall. It wasn’t a big deal, but it sure felt like a big deal, and I never want to feel that way again. What little I know of sailing is just a little indeed.

When sailing into the wind, you tack back and forth, luffing, the sails a taut sputter, the boom of the mast swinging back and forth across the hull. (Don’t forget to duck when it comes!)

It's the movement of dialectic. You go straight by alternating direction to and fro, your course ever one of correction.

I don't sail, but I do try to move in faith through the world; and this, in my experience, is the movement of faith: resistance, acceptance; resistance, acceptance. Resist what is for its being not God's perfection; accept what is for its being God's promise. Resist what is for it being not yet God's perfect reign; accept what is for its being of God's creating.

Job is an old story. Job's is an old tale, thought to be one of the oldest in the Bible, thought also not to be native to the Jews but probably one they picked up somewhere and played with themselves: this old story of a good man who'd enjoyed good fortune but whom God wanted to test as to whether his goodness was inherent within him and was due his having had a pretty good life. It's essentially "Trading Places," the movie starring Eddie Murphy and Dan Ackroyd.

Job, like Louis Winthorpe III, lost everything, but unlike Louis Winthorpe III, he maintained his goodness. Moreover, he continued to plead his case—until, at last, God showed up.

This is a theodicy, this story, a justification of God. The purpose of this story is, among other things I suppose, to justify God and God's creation, to justify it to us amidst our so often suffering it.

The thing is, I think what's truly justified in this story is Job and, by virtue of him, humanity.

"Does it not matter to you that we are perishing?"

That Jesus came suggests it does. That Jesus established the church suggests it does.

You know, it's possible we've gotten God wrong. It's possible, in this old story of a righteous man and a mighty God, we got God wrong, or at least we didn't get God entirely right. God *is* mighty. God *is* also vulnerable. God *is* the creator of all things, so who are we to think it isn't all quite up to snuff? God *is* also love, which means God doesn't rest easy when aware of the suffering of all that God loves. God does have a perspective we don't have, so who are we to decide what's good and what's bad? God also shares our perspective, shares in our subjectivity, that we might share in God's magnanimity.

Resist; accept. Resist; accept. Even headwinds move us toward God's glory in the end.

Together we sail.

Thanks be to God.