

When Storm Clouds Loom

June 23, 2024

Storm Clouds Were Looming

The spring of 2003 was a tough time for me. If you remember that spring, the world was tense. There were protests and demonstrations across the world every day as the U.S. mounted its case for war against Iraq. With every beat of the war drum, I could feel my entire being drawing more and more tense.

I'd been in Europe that spring, and the free pass that much of our media was giving to the hawks was not only confounding, it left me truly fearful. That spring was also tough for me because, as the crescendo to war grew, chaos seemed to be reigning in the rest of my life as well. I was still working full time in the Roman Catholic Church at that point, and the week before the U.S. government rained down shock and awe over Iraq, my church published an official pronouncement that banned gays from the seminaries. As the drumbeat of war drew me tighter and tighter, the inhumanity of my church, the terrorism that my church was perpetrating against decent people was tying my stomach into ever more inextricable knots.

Then the phone rang. "Bridge, dad has cancer again. They think they've caught it early this time, but..."

Drawn taut by the lead up to the war, sickened by the sinful actions of my church, my dad's illness threw my head into a tailspin. I had been preparing his eulogy for years, because when the time came I could not NOT give that one final gift to the sinner-saint who was my beloved father...but I was not ready to preach that sermon yet.

My experience of that spring is not unique. I'm sure that many, if not most of you have had times in your lives when you have felt backed into a corner, tighter and tighter, times when it seems like life has brought you to a tsunami, and there is no way that you can see to get out alive. What was probably most difficult for me – and again, I suspect this is common for many – was that there seemed like there was nothing I could do: the U.S. government, the Catholic Church, and cancer. Which one do you have a chance against? They were three massive storms that were like armies converging from every side, making retreat impossible.

The Scriptures

All of this comes to mind as we read from the fourth chapter of the Gospel of Mark today. Jesus and his friends are traveling by boat across the sea and a frightening storm pops up. Of course, the frightening storm is a metaphor. I just shared a time in my life that was particularly stormy. I'm sure it doesn't take a lot of work to think of a time when the winds of chaos seemed to be buffeting you from every side.

In our Gospel, Jesus is in the back of the boat, asleep on a cushion. I'll admit, for the longest time, I didn't know what to make of the fact that Jesus was asleep amidst the storm. Didn't he care? Was he that disconnected from everyone else's experience? How could he sleep through that?

Then I met my husband. On one of the first camping trips we ever went on together, there was a big storm forecast one night, so we put a large tarp over the tent. We battened down everything as best we could and hunkered down into our sleeping bags. The storm rolled in about 2 a.m. and it was a doozy. The winds were strong, the rain fast and intense, and because of the giant tarp over the tent, the sound of each raindrop was intensified. With each drop of rain, my head raced. What if the rain got in? What if a tree fell? What if we had to seek other shelter and the car wouldn't start? What if, what if, what if?

As my heart and mind were whirling, you know what Scott was doing? Sleeping. Or at least, seeming to sleep. I would later learn that at one point he did awaken, but he was still. While I was restless and tossing and turning, allowing my fears to twist me all topsy-turvy, he was still.

Years later, when I was recounting this story and it came out that he was actually awake, he said, "I just stayed still because I knew adding any energy to the situation would just lead to more chaos."

When the disciples wake Jesus amidst the storm, he says "Peace! Be still." What if he's not only talking to the wind and the sea, but to the disciples? What if, amidst the chaos and the storms of life, Jesus is saying to us, "Peace! Be still.?" And what if Jesus sleeping amidst the storm isn't a lack of care or situational awareness, but rather modeling inner peace for us as well. Whether it's politics or relationships or health, Jesus is drawing us away from the whirlwind, away from the swirling and the fretting and the chaos, and toward peace.

Our passage from the Book of Job which Beth read for us today approaches this peacefulness from another angle. This passage comes after everything that Job cares about has been taken from him – his possessions, his livelihood, his family, his health. Everything he has is taken from him or destroyed. He rails against God. And then God's voice comes out of the whirlwind and says, "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?"

Again, for years I misunderstood this passage. I thought God was saying, "Who do you think you are to question me? I made the earth, and the stars and the sea and the clouds. Once you can do any of that, let me know, and only then you can question how I do things."

But now I wonder if, rather than this being a message that basically says, "Sit down and shut up because I'm the Creator and you're merely part of creation," maybe this is again, the Creator drawing us into peace. When the LORD says to Job:

"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?"

(Job 38:4)

Maybe God isn't playing the trumpiest of all trump cards and saying, "Stop crying, I'm bigger and smarter and better than you," and rather, God is drawing Job to experience the peace that

grounding ourselves in nature provides. Maybe this is a 6th century B.C.E. version of Wendell Berry's "Peace of the Wild Things":

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

Conclusion

I'd better wrap up – we have a baptism to celebrate and a picnic to enjoy. So your homework is this: When despair grows in you, when you're weary and feeling small, when storms seem to be assailing you from every side, find ways to find peace. Maybe you'll earmark these passages in your Bible. Maybe you'll memorize the "Peace of the Wild Things." Maybe you'll do what Wendell Berry suggests in the "Peace of the Wild Things," and go lie down in nature, grounding yourself in the awe of creation. Maybe your technique will be yoga or breathing exercises or swimming. Maybe you'll take a page from Scott Daniels' playbook and draw yourself into calmness so that your fiancé doesn't freak out.

Friends, the scriptures don't promise smooth sailing. Following Jesus doesn't mean that there won't be storms in our lives. What following Jesus does do is give us some tools to live in Godly ways amidst the storms.

And that brings us back to the story I opened with. In the spring of 2003, I had no delusion that I would be able to slay the giants of the U.S. government, the Catholic Church, or cancer. But I did start swimming five days a week and calibrated my strokes to a mantra from Psalm 46: "Be still and know that I am God."

What's interesting is that it was the peace brought about by that prayer coupled with an intense immersion into creation – in this case the water – that eventually empowered me to make some personal changes. No, I didn't stop the war or homophobia or cancer. But I did become active in politics. I did start spending a lot more time with my dad. And this discipline is also where I found the courage to heed the call to leave the Catholic Church in order to heed the call to ordination.

Two quick things to note: first, finding peace gave me strength and stability – not to diminish the storms in my life – but to change my experience of the storms. Second, in all three cases, changing my experience of the storms also allowed me to be a force for good in others' experience of the chaos. And that's when we know something is of God – when it brings us peace and that peace ripples out.

And so my prayer as we baptize Sunny today, and for all of us, is that when we're being tossed and buffeted by the storms of life, we will find ways to access Jesus' peace, and that in turn, that peace will ripple out to this world God loves so much. May it be so. Alleluia and Amen.

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Job 38:1-11; Mark 4:35-41
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