

Reflection on the Word: June 24, 2018 Psalm 46; Mark 4:35-41

A young medical student named Jim, who had developed a life-threatening cancer, wrote a letter to another man who was a cancer survivor, and this is what he wrote: "I want to believe in a God who cares...because I may meet him sooner than I had expected. I think I am at the point where I can accept the existence of God...but I can't yet believe God cares about me."

In his struggle with the raging storm of cancer, that young man echoes the words of the disciples in today's gospel when they cry out to Jesus, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" It is evening and the disciples are in the boat with Jesus. They are crossing the Sea of Galilee when a great storm arises. The boat is beaten by the wind and the waves; it is filling with water and the disciples fear that they will sink. All the while, Jesus is asleep in the stern, seemingly indifferent to their peril and unperturbed by their fear. And so it seems only natural for the disciples to cry: "Teacher, do you not care that we are going to drown?"

These words, or ones similar to them, have been spoken many times, in many different situations, as people face their own particular storms in life. Perhaps they have even been your words. In the face of the tragedies that people face every day, and the global crises that plague our world; as well as in our own personal times of confusion, hurting or trouble, it often feels like Jesus or God is far from us, indifferent to the pain and suffering that is experienced.

And when we are in the midst of chaos and despair, like the disciples, we just want to know that someone is concerned, that someone cares. It helps us when life is difficult.

Like in the story of a fifteen year old named Doug. He had been feeling badly for several days ... suffering high temperatures and flu-like symptoms, and so his mother took him to the hospital, where he was admitted and diagnosed with leukemia.

The doctors told him in frank terms about his disease. They said that for the next three years he would have to undergo chemotherapy. They didn't sugar-coat the side effects. They told him he would be bald and that his body would become bloated. He heard all of this, and Doug went into a deep depression.

His aunt called a florist and sent him some flowers. She told the clerk that they were for her teenage nephew who had leukemia. When the flowers arrived, they were beautiful. Doug read the card from his aunt, and then he saw a second card. It said, "Douglas, I took your aunt's order. I work at the florist shop. I had leukemia when I was seven years old. I'm 22 now. Good luck. My heart goes out to you. Sincerely, Laura."

Doug's face lit up. "Oh!" he said.

There he was in one of the best hospitals in the country, filled with millions of dollars of sophisticated medical equipment. He was being treated by expert doctors and nurses with medical training totaling hundreds of years. But it was a sales clerk in a flower shop--someone who made a few hundred dollars a week--

who took the time to care, who identified with him, who did what her heart told her to do, who gave Doug the hope and the will to carry on.

The disciples wanted to know that Jesus cared ... and he did. After Jesus woke, he spoke to the winds and the waves. "Peace! Be still!" And they were. That was the ancient way of saying that Jesus was stronger than the chaos of life.

And the awestruck disciples respond, "Even the winds and the sea obey him!" Just minutes before, they had been in the most terrible storm of their lives. Out on the open sea, the storm had threatened to swamp their boat. They were terrified ... baling water, wrestling the wind-whipped sails, and hanging on for their lives. And Jesus was fast asleep.

In the midst of the storm, they cried: "Don't you care that we are perishing?" Jesus, when he is awakened, rebukes the wind and commands it to quiet down. "Peace! Be still!" But I wonder, were these words not as much a rebuke of the disciples as they were a command to the wind?

We are like the disciples. We want Jesus to calm the wind and seas. We want to shout at God, "What's the matter with you? Don't you see we are perishing? Don't you see how so many of us — children, refugees, the poor and hungry, those struggling with relationships, or suffering with pain, or fighting a life-threatening illness — are sinking in the midst of a storm that is about to overwhelm? Wake up, Jesus! Stop sleeping when we need you most!"

Like the disciples, we believe that divine power is in the ability to control things. We assume, like the disciples, that the miracle is in Jesus rebuking and calming the storm.

But as David Henson puts it: this isn't so much a story about Jesus' ability to control the weather. This is a story about how little we believe God to be with us in the midst of an overwhelming storm. It's about how, deep down, maybe we don't really believe that a God-with-us is actually enough. It's about how what we really want is a God who is in control. And it is an indictment of the disciples and of us.

In other words, the miracle in this story is not about Jesus calming the storm and taking control. The miracle in this story is that Jesus was with the disciples in the water-logged and weatherbeaten boat, experiencing the same terrible storm, the same terrible waves, the same terrible danger. And that alone should have been enough.

Over and over again, David Henson says, we are reminded that "God's power isn't in the control of creation or of people, but in being in covenant and relationship with them. It isn't in imposing the divine will or insisting on its own way but in sojourning with us as we fumble around and make our way in the world. God's power is not in miraculous interventions, pre-emptive strikes in the cosmic war against suffering and evil, but in inviting us to build a kingdom of love, peace and justice with God. God's power is not in the obliterating of what is bad in the world, but in empowering us to build something good in this world."

And isn't this true power? Instead of enforcing control and solutions onto the world, God's power is revealed in coming alongside us, demonstrating through the life of Jesus, what it really means to trust and to live in love and with a sense of care and compassion for others. God's power is revealed in Jesus' journeying with us, suffering with us, and even staying with us in the boat when the storms come.

Storms happen. And they happen in all of our lives. Sometimes Jesus will calm the storm ... but sometimes he doesn't. What's important, however, is knowing that Jesus is with us in the boat. As followers of Jesus, we may find ourselves in places and situations that generate fear, and fear is not always inappropriate in this world. We fear when the doctor gives that life-threatening diagnosis; we fear the changes that come with aging or with loss of independence; we fear in places of violence, hatred, and war; we fear when children are neglected or become victims of abuse; we fear when those in positions of power steamroll over the needs and vulnerabilities of others, simply in the interests of protecting their own power and control. And as a church we fear that our boat will be swamped in the perilous waters of secularism and the undermining of religious freedoms. But our relationship with and experience of the God made known to us in Jesus does not end in fear.

The challenge is to look beneath the fear and see the sustaining hand of the God of grace and mercy, even when life's twists and turns are so frightening.

The challenge is to believe that for those who trust in God there is a way when it seems there is no way, and that Jesus' peace is so much stronger than the storms of this world and the storms of our hearts. The challenge is to trust the God who is our refuge and our strength, a present help in trouble.

United Church minister Ross Bartlett says: Every day the world rolls over on someone who, just yesterday, was sitting on top. Every day someone's placid voyage across a calm sea is disrupted by an unexpected storm: grim medical news, a financial reversal, the collapse of a relationship, the death of a dream. We all have storms that wash over us.

Whether it's an event or situation "out there" somewhere or some inner struggle – it can have tremendous impact on us, causing us to cry out, "God, don't you care that I'm perishing here?" It is in times like this that the faith we need is also the faith which is severely tested. A great deal depends on whether we have nurtured our faith in good times so that it is available to us through the bad times ... challenging us to "Be still! And know that I am God!"

It can't be said enough: God never, ever promises that nothing bad will ever happen. God never promises smooth sailing and blue skies every day. What God does promise is that when the world comes crashing down, God is right there with us. Jesus is there with us, in the sinking boat.

And so we pray:

Gracious God, when the waves of life threaten to overwhelm us, when it seems that you are far from us, may we sense your presence. When the chaos of life causes fear and confusion, may we hear your voice soothing us: "Peace, be still." Help us to trust the promise of our faith that you care for us and will lead us through the storms. We pray in the name and Spirit of Jesus, whose gift is one of strength and stillness. Amen.