

June 21, 2015

Pentecost IV

Job 38:1-11

1 Then the LORD answered Job from the whirlwind: 2 Who is this darkening counsel with words lacking knowledge? 3 Prepare yourself like a man; I will interrogate you, and you will respond to me. 4 Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations? Tell me if you know. 5 Who set its measurements? Surely you know. Who stretched a measuring tape on it? 6 On what were its footings sunk; who laid its cornerstone, 7 while the morning stars sang in unison and all the divine beings shouted? 8 Who enclosed the Sea behind doors when it burst forth from the womb, 9 when I made the clouds its garment, the dense clouds its wrap, 10 when I imposed my limit for it, put on a bar and doors 11 and said, "You may come this far, no farther; here your proud waves stop"?

Psalms 107:1-3, 23-32 (29)

1 "Give thanks to the LORD because he is good, because his faithful love lasts forever!" 2 That's what those who are redeemed by the LORD say, the ones God redeemed from the power of their enemies, 3 the ones God gathered from various countries, from east and west, north and south. 4 Some of the redeemed had wandered into the desert, into the wasteland. They couldn't find their way to a city or town. 5 They were hungry and thirsty; their lives were slipping away. 6 So they cried out to the LORD in their distress, and God delivered them from their desperate circumstances. 7 God led them straight to human habitation. 8 Let them thank the LORD for his faithful love and his wondrous works for all people, 9 because God satisfied the one who was parched with thirst, and he filled up the hungry with good things! 10 Some of the redeemed had been sitting in darkness and deep gloom; they were prisoners suffering in chains 11 because they had disobeyed God's instructions and rejected the Most High's plans. 12 So God humbled them with hard work. They stumbled, and there was no one to help them. 13 So they cried out to the LORD in their distress, and God saved them from their desperate circumstances. 14 God brought them out from the darkness and deep gloom; he shattered their chains. 15 Let them thank the LORD for his faithful love and his wondrous works for all people, 16 because God has shattered bronze doors and split iron bars in two! 17 Some of the redeemed were fools because of their sinful ways. They suffered because of their wickedness. 18 They had absolutely no appetite for food; they had arrived at death's gates. 19 So they cried out to the LORD in their distress, and God saved them from their desperate circumstances. 20 God gave the order and healed them; he rescued them from their pit. 21 Let them thank the LORD for his faithful love and his wondrous works for all people. 22 Let them offer thanksgiving sacrifices and declare what God has done in songs of joy! 23 Some of the redeemed had gone out on the ocean in ships, making their living on the high seas. 24 They saw what the LORD had made; they saw his wondrous works in the depths of the sea. 25 God spoke and stirred up a storm that brought the waves up high. 26 The waves went as high as the sky; they crashed down to the depths. The sailors' courage melted at this terrible situation. 27 They staggered and stumbled around like they were drunk. None of their skill was of any help. 28 So they cried out to the LORD in their distress, and God brought them out safe from their desperate circumstances. 29 God quieted the storm to a whisper; the sea's waves were hushed. 30 So they rejoiced because the waves had calmed down; then God led them to the harbor they were hoping for. 31 Let them thank the LORD for

his faithful love and his wondrous works for all people. 32 Let them exalt God in the congregation of the people and praise God in the assembly of the elders.

2 Corinthians 6:1-13

1 Since we work together with him, we are also begging you not to receive the grace of God in vain. 2 He says, I listened to you at the right time, and I helped you on the day of salvation. Look, now is the right time! Look, now is the day of salvation! 3 We don't give anyone any reason to be offended about anything so that our ministry won't be criticized. 4 Instead, we commend ourselves as ministers of God in every way. We did this with our great endurance through problems, disasters, and stressful situations. 5 We went through beatings, imprisonments, and riots. We experienced hard work, sleepless nights, and hunger. 6 We displayed purity, knowledge, patience, and generosity. We served with the Holy Spirit, genuine love, 7 telling the truth, and God's power. We carried the weapons of righteousness in our right hand and our left hand. 8 We were treated with honor and dishonor and with verbal abuse and good evaluation. We were seen as both fake and real, 9 as unknown and well known, as dying—and look, we are alive! We were seen as punished but not killed, 10 as going through pain but always happy, as poor but making many rich, and as having nothing but owning everything.

Mark 4:35-41

35 Later that day, when evening came, Jesus said to them, "Let's cross over to the other side of the lake." 36 They left the crowd and took him in the boat just as he was. Other boats followed along. 37 Gale-force winds arose, and waves crashed against the boat so that the boat was swamped. 38 But Jesus was in the rear of the boat, sleeping on a pillow. They woke him up and said, "Teacher, don't you care that we're drowning?" 39 He got up and gave orders to the wind, and he said to the lake, "Silence! Be still!" The wind settled down and there was a great calm. 40 Jesus asked them, "Why are you frightened? Don't you have faith yet?" 41 Overcome with awe, they said to each other, "Who then is this? Even the wind and the sea obey him!"

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

Today's Gospel reading holds a special place in my heart. After high school, I spent a year traveling with Captive Free, a music and family ministry that sent teams across the U.S. to lead worship, host youth lock-ins, facilitate Bible schools, and perform other events for local congregations. During that year, our theme was Calm the Storm, which we drew from this passage from Mark. Our band led conversation and played music based around this theme, that God acts to calm the storms in our lives.

What we didn't know was how stormy that year would be for us. At our very first event, a kid jumped

on the back of one of our team leader. Not only did he throw out her back, but when she fell on him, his leg broke. A few days later, a youth leader from my church back home died suddenly in a motorcycle accident. At the end of that very first week, another teammates' best friend, just a teenager, died unexpectedly after a bout with cancer all despite a hopeful prognosis. This was all in our first week on the road! Throughout the year, we weathered storms, more deaths, inter-team issues, broken relationships and poor life choices. Dear goodness did we need God to calm our storms.

The thematic thread of storms flows throughout today's readings. God speaks to Job out of the whirlwind, or in some other translations, out of the

storm. Jesus delivers the disciples from the storm, a theme also echoed in the psalm. Though Paul doesn't mention his famous shipwreck from Acts 27, we not only know that he faced such a storm, but here in 2nd Corinthians he also he speaks of hardships and calamities, of a whirlwind of struggles faced by the early evangelists.

Surely, we all have faced storms in our lives, ones where the wind and the waves seem intent upon scuttling the boats of our plans, of capsizing our future into the murky unknown of life's raging seas. Some of us face financial uncertainty so often that the tide of debt seems to rise up and even over our heads. Others face brokenness in family, where the lightning of anger seems to split apart the bonds of

blood. Still others face health issues, unhealthy work environments, loneliness, addiction, oppression, death, and an entire hurricane of anxieties that assault our lives.

In the midst of it all, we seem to find Jesus asleep in the boat. We wonder if he cares about the whirlwind, about our plight, about our lives. We wonder, when the storm rages on, why the Creator doesn't seem in control of creation. So, along with the disciples, we cry out: "Don't you care that we're drowning?!" Don't you care that we're drowning, Lord? Drowning in debt? Addiction? Loneliness? Disease? Disaster? Racism? Violence? Don't you care, Lord?

This was surely how Job felt as well. Though we only hear God speak in today's first reading, it follows chapters upon chapters of Job's friends trying to explain the storms Job suffered as well as Job complaining that God didn't hear his complaint in the first place. Job, a righteous man – even God says so at the beginning of the book – suffers an incomprehensible tornado of injustice at the hands of Satan. And so he wonders whether God cares, a question that we likely have spoken ourselves from time to time.

Likely, to our ears God's response seems a bit harsh. Perhaps more than a bit. It seems like God adds to the storm. We hear only the beginning of God's challenge to Job and Job's friends, all of

whom God reminds that, quite simply, they're not God. That they don't know the depth or breadth of how God formed our lives. That they can't possibly know the subtleties and nuances of how our lives are formed and how our circumstances arise. And this goes on for pages! At first glance, God seems careless, removed from Job's suffering, asleep at the front of the boat and not worried about the surrounding storm.

At the end of that first week on Captive Free, our team was devastated. The van we traveled in was full of angst and tears, of suffering and doubt. I found myself walking into a field outside of a gas station in the middle of nowhere Nebraska, yelling up somewhere at the sky, screaming, "Why God? What

do you want from us? Don't you care?" I questioned whether God cared, about why God seemed asleep in the midst of our storm. We were supposed to spend a year sharing with thousands of people about how God calmed the storm, and instead we found ourselves mired in the midst of the hurricane, unable to see God, to trust God, for all we could comprehend was our fear, our destruction, our sadness.

Yet, another strand runs through today's readings, one bound up tightly with this theme of storm, and that is the thread of faithfulness. Amidst the storm, one of the psalmists' favorite refrains rings once again upon our ears, that God's "steadfast love endures forever." Paul recounts God's faithfulness to

the apostles' through both freedom and persecution, through success and trials. Jesus, faithful to still the storm, decries the disciples' doubt, juxtaposes his faithfulness with their lack of faith.

We've seen this come alive for us as well. Sometimes incredible tempests of trials cause revivals of faith. Sometimes crashing waves of worldly judgement remind us of the rising tide of God's grace. Sometimes the winds of change so suddenly change our life plans also remind us that the Holy Spirit also blows, guiding us in God's love and mercy wherever we go. In the storms of our lives, we're sometimes able to see God's faithfulness.

At other times, though, we may feel more like Job here. Notice that, in this passage from Job, we

find no such mention of faithfulness. God speaks out of that storm with speech much more aggressive than passive, lambasting Job with the reminders that God is God and Job just isn't. We might imagine God yelling at Job, "Stay in your lane!" Slightly less colloquially, remember who you are. Don't overstep your bounds. If we're honest with ourselves, at times we're not sure what to think of God in the midst of the storm. Just like Job, we feel chastised. We feel challenged. Perhaps, even like the disciples, we feel abandoned.

Yet, notice again the promise held within Scripture. "The Lord answered Job from within the whirlwind." THE LORD ANSWERED JOB FROM WITHIN THE WHIRLWIND! God didn't abandon Job, though

he suffered for thirty eight chapters. God suffered alongside Job every step of the way. God remained faithful despite Job's questions, despite Job's doubts. We hear exactly what we need to know. God speaks from within the whirlwind. God suffered through the very same storm that seemed to Job's life. Job, assailed by the tempest of Satan's tempting, finds God's faithfulness at the eye of the storm.

This week in Charleston, a storm arose so strong with hatred, so violent with racism, that I'm not sure anyone could see God's faithfulness. It was sure hard for me to find. Nine black people died in a terrorist attack at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. And let's be clear: the shooter said in no uncertain terms that this was a killing people not

because of their faith but because of their race. Nine people, two of whom graduated from Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, from our seminary, died at the hands of a Lutheran, member of one of our sister churches. In the words of Bishop Eaton, "All of a sudden and for all of us, this is an intensely personal tragedy. One of our own is alleged to have shot and killed two who adopted us as their own."

This wasn't an attack on faith as some have tried to frame it, but rather a whirlwind of prejudice against black women and men, an assault on people created by God with the divine image at their very cores. The sin of racial prejudice took root so deeply that one of our own killed those made his sisters and brothers in baptism. In the midst of such rage, such

thunder of violence, such lightning of prejudice, God seemed nowhere near the storm.

And then the bond hearing happened. Then family members of the fallen, just days after the brutal deaths of their loved ones, spoke words of grace not only to the judge, but directly to Dylan Roof. Alana Simmons, granddaughter of Daniel Simmons, said, “Although my grandfather and the other victims died at the hands of hate, this is proof – everyone’s plea for your soul – is proof that they lived in love and their legacies will live in love. Hate won’t win.” Anthony Thompson, the husband of Myra Thompson: “We would like you to take this opportunity to repent, to confess, to give your to the one who matters the most, to Christ.” The daughter of Ethel Lance, went

even further. "I will never be able to hold her again, but I forgive you...You hurt me. You hurt a lot of people but God forgives you, and I forgive you."

Bethane Middleton-Brown, sister of Depayne

Middleton-Doctor, summed up their feelings this way:

"We have no room for hating. We have to forgive."

The Lord answered Charleston from the whirlwind. Amidst the storm, we find Jesus not asleep at the boat, but alive in the voices of forgiveness and reconciliation of Emanuel AME. We find the Holy Spirit alive in the words of grace when only condemnation was deserved. We find God refusing to let hate win. We find God calling people to repentance and relationship with Christ. We find God working in forgiveness with a light so bright that it casts out the

darkness of hate even from those who might be justified in their hatred!

God is in the midst of the storm, refusing to let the storm win. God did not cause these awful things to happen. God did not bring this storm upon the victims or their loved ones. But God is faithful to suffer with them, to weather the storm in their midst, to be their hope when hope seems impossible, to work for love when hate has killed those that they love. Jesus suffered in Charleston this week, and also spoke from amidst the storm in the lives of the victims families.

We face many kinds of storms in life, some that pass with ease and others that seem to rage without end. What we find, though, is that God weathers the storms with us. God always shows up. There may be

times where we doubt God. Surely many of us questioned the heavens after this week's sinful hatred led to violence and death. And that's alright. God's big enough to handle our worries and questions and always present to hear them amidst the storm. God's everlasting faithfulness weathers even our strongest winds of unfaithfulness. God remains with us, alongside us, suffering as we suffer amidst the chaos, weeping as we weep amidst the storm, and hoping as we hope amidst the storm. Sometimes it may seem God is asleep in the boat. But even at that moment, God is with us. The God who holds the universe will carry us through even the harshest of storms. The storms we encounter in life come intertwined with the faithfulness of God.

Here's the Gospel at the heart of these scriptures:
God will not abandon us amidst the storm, for even if
we feel like the end is near, God is with us. We might,
like the disciples, wonder and question God's
faithfulness even here surrounded the wind and the
waves. And that's okay, because we find God's
mysterious, faithful presence where we most need it:
amidst the storm. Amen.