

Sermon for June 23, 2024
Highland Presbyterian Church
Sermon texts: Mark 4:35-41 and Job 38:1-11
Sermon by: Rev. Adrian White

Our Gospel text shows us Jesus in his whole humanity and his whole divinity. In the story, Jesus is like Jonah, that most hapless of prophets, who slept through a storm on a boat until he was awoken by shipmates who feared the waves. Jesus is divine, for controlling storms is the purview of God alone — so the psalms teach us. So God reminds Job in the text we heard Tom read, which is the beginning of God's long awaited response to Job's lamentations and demands after he has lost everything.

This is the point at which the disciples really begin to freak out about who this person is to whom they've attached all their hopes and livelihood. In the first few chapters of Mark, Jesus has performed some healings and banished some demons, but he was one of a number of miracle workers in Galilee at that time. The calming of the storm is the first great miracle in Mark, when the story really gets juicy, when unexpected and impossible things seem to happen one after the other. I think it's fitting, since Mark begins his gospel account with Jesus's baptism. Now the disciples have been baptized, in a way, by a storm that calls for greater faith and trust than they bargained for when they dropped their nets on the shore not so very long ago.

The disciples were fishermen, so being on a boat in a storm was not new to them. I wonder what about *this* storm struck such fear in their hearts. I wonder why they believed that their new teacher and friend Jesus could help them in a way they could not help themselves. I have sympathy for their fear — they didn't know whether to trust the hope they had that Jesus could keep them safe. They didn't know yet that he was the kind of person who would show up to help them when they called, who would stay on the boat with them until the waters calmed.

I have, many times, shared the disciples sentiment — the whole complicated mess of rage and hope and fear and longing. Along the way, I almost didn't make it here— not just *here* but to this calling to ministry. There have been a thousand logistical hurdles, stumbles in my faith, and moments of surging self-doubt that might have kept me from finding my way.

Perhaps it is risky for me to share my crisis of faith in my first sermon in this pulpit when you are just beginning to know me as your pastor. But I want to tell you how I got here. And I imagine that perhaps some of you have had similar thoughts along your journey of life and

faith. I imagine I am not the only one who has once or twice shouted, “God, do you not care that we are perishing?” and hoped someone was listening.

One such day stands out in my memory. I was doing my internship in Clinical Pastoral Education at Vanderbilt. Though I was primarily working in the main adult hospital, I had the opportunity one day to shadow Amanda, one of the chaplains at the children’s hospital.

We were in the over-bright hallway of the pediatric ICU and she began to brief me on her cases that day. It was overwhelming enough to hear details about sick and injured kids. I felt a wave of crashing emotions when she told me about two children on her list who were dying due to the violence or neglect of adults.

In both cases, the children were suffering. In both cases, the doctors had exhausted their options. In both cases, the parents were barely beginning to come to terms with the doctors’ assessment. In one case, a parent who had also been injured in the same accident prayed to take their child’s place; in the other, the parents begged God for hours on end for a miracle. As we prepared to visit these children and their families, I felt so inadequate. I felt my heart crack, and my faith along with it.

I found my voice enough to ask Amanda: what do you say when a patient tells you “I know my child is going to be ok” or “God is going to heal them” when you know all the medical details?

She smiled a sad smile and told me of her offering: “I’m going to hope for that with you.”

I could tell she meant it, and I marveled at her groundedness. Hope felt as insufficient as the treatment options. When I met the families of these children, I saw the wrestling match of hope and despair in their eyes. I prayed with them for a medically impossible outcome, and I felt like a liar.

I couldn’t stop shaking all day, rattled by this hurricane of doubt and grief. I got home and raged at the idea of a God who would let this happen. Why would God bother creating humans if only to make us capable of deliberately harming innocent children? Why would a all powerful and totally good God allow them to die? If Jesus can stop storms, then where is he? I began to wonder if a world without God was better than one with a God who would let this happen. In my desolation, I wanted not just to blame God for these acts of human depravity but banish God for them.

Except. Except. The only possibility that hurt worse than the idea of a God who refused to intervene in the precise way that I wanted was the idea of a God who leaves us alone to deal with the inevitable suffering that comes with being human.

If there was no loving God, would it have hurt any less to see those children in pain? Did I really want to *not* feel the heartbreak and compassion that overtook me when I sat with their families? When I tended to my calling that day to provide company and solidarity and care, it was with the outrageous hope that my little offering of presence mattered. How much greater then was the presence of God for those families on the worst day?

I don't have a succinct answer — or a good answer — to the complicated questions about what it means to be God's beloved creation and at the same time to be creatures with free will who are capable of horrible deeds and who keep creating systems designed only to extract and destroy. But I do think blaming God is taking a shortcut to nowhere.

So much of the suffering in the world is the result what we do to each other. In *Knowing Christ Crucified: The Witness of the African American Religious Experience*, Catholic theologian M. Shawn Copeland writes about the faith stories of people who lived through, and in many cases died at the hands of, the system of chattel slavery in the United States. She is not trying to solve the conundrum of a God who is both just and powerful. Rather, she writes with clarity: “social suffering is not the product of God's will but it arises from that social oppression that results from the abuse of human freedom.”

She is not trying to make cheap meaning out of the abomination of chattel slavery. Instead she elaborates on the faith stories, spirituals, and testimonies of African Americans and explores how Christ's promise of freedom and peace allowed people enduring the cruelty of enslavement to hold onto their identity and humanity amidst horrific circumstances. She examines our ethical commitments today, asserting that the memory of enslaved people and the ongoing legacy of slavery demands our solidarity. When we do the challenging work of taking collective responsibility for past and present human suffering, we do not do it alone. She writes, “The love of an unreservedly loving God will hold us in our risk, will not allow us to forget, will hold us in hope.”

When I recall now the hope and despair of the families at Vanderbilt, I see that they are parts of a whole. Despair alone numbs us; hope alone is naïve. Held together, this is the combination that moves us to solidarity, which Copeland describes as a true discipleship

that demands we give our whole selves in remembering and tending to the suffering of creation. In this posture we can remain attentive to the ravages of war, genocide, pandemic, famine and climate catastrophe without losing ourselves. Through discipleship we are equipped and called to respond to the suffering of our loved ones and the mundane evils that try to overwhelm us.

Jesus never promises us that with a word he will silence every storm if only we yell loudly enough for help. He calls us to feed people, clothe them, pursue justice for them, visit them when they are sick, imprisoned or grieving. Jesus tells stories about healing, compassion, and love and makes clear that these are our models. He doesn't teach us to stop storms – he teaches us to stay in the boat and to trust that God is present even when it seems there is no end in sight.

Amidst the first great miracle, Jesus knows that we will not experience the fullness of God's peace and reconciliation through the cross in our lifetimes. And yet he invites us, again and again through stories and acts of mercy, to live lives of compassion in thanksgiving for his work of grace. It is good news that, as our reformed confessions remind us, in life and death we belong to God. Not because our belonging, or our faith, exempts us from suffering or guarantees our ticket to Heaven. The Gospel calls us to love, mercy, and righteousness not so that we can achieve salvation but so that we might become more like the One who saves.

I follow Jesus because he teaches me how to stay in the boat on the days when remaining on the shore or even drowning both seem more appealing. What gets me through bad days and bad news cycles is the transforming solidarity of discipleship. And mostly I'll be like the Twelve, freaking out and breaking down from grief, fear, and anger. But I'll be hopeful, too, even when being so might make me a fool.

I learned from chaplain Amanda that hope is worth being foolish for. As people of faith, hope is not only about the actual outcome but about threading ourselves into the great work of love that is vaster than our understanding. It's not the absence of despair in the storm. Hope is picking up an oar even when we can't see past the waves, trusting that we never row alone. Thanks be to God. Amen.