

Proper 7 B June 24, 2018

Despair in the Storm

The Rev. Deborah Woolsey

Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens OH

When Saul and all Israel heard the words of Goliath, they were dismayed and greatly afraid. Yet, David said to Saul, “Let no one’s heart fail because of Goliath.” And when Jesus’ disciples became overwhelmed by a great storm on the Sea of Galilee, they woke Jesus from a peaceful sleep to ask him, “Do you not care that we are dying?”

There seems to be quiet a lot of distress and fear in our readings from scripture this morning. An emotional combination that can lead to despair. In the Old Testament lesson, we heard the people of Israel were saved from despair because of the faith of an unlikely hero, the boy David, who was the only person not afraid to face a gargantuan threat to his people. So he stepped up and saved them with the flick of a well-practiced wrist, and there was much rejoicing and I’m sure a great deal of relief too. It’s a story many people like, because when we are faced with a threatening situation, we tend to prefer a strong man or maybe a wise woman to rise up and protect us, to handle the situation for us so we don’t have to. Or maybe because we feel we don’t have the skills or the time or the energy or the physicality or maybe even the faith to be the hero we human beings always seem to long for. Whoever is willing to take the risks we are afraid to take and fix a challenging situation.

And when we turn our eyes to the Gospel lesson for today, and see the disciples turn to a peaceful and resting Jesus instead of facing the storm that sprung up suddenly as they were on their way to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, we might recognize the same yearning for a hero to save them from what they are afraid of. For when they turned to Jesus in the midst of the storm the disciples asked Jesus the question that seems to be at the heart of all these readings: Don’t you care? Don’t you care that we are perishing? Don’t you care that we are dying? Don’t you care?

In that question I hear more than frustration. I hear more than fear. I hear despair. The feeling that there is no hope. The feeling that they felt they have done everything they can and despite their best efforts, the source of their trouble – the storm – has not stopped and they can’t seem to figure out what do. So, perhaps believing Jesus has the power to fix the storm, the disciples turned to Jesus for the easy fix: stop the storm so they can have smooth sailing.

Commentators like to caution us preachers about not being too hard on the disciples today, because they were the ones in the storm, after all, and we are all here in our nice safe building, far from the sea, far from hurricane gales and waves that threaten to swamp us. It must have been a terrifying situation, and the disciples had every right to feel what they were feeling. But there are other kinds of storms, and there may be more to this story that the author of Mark may be conveying to those who follow Jesus in the days this Gospel was written and those of us who follow Jesus now.

Scholars like to point out there are strong Old Testament overtones in this pericope, or section in Mark's Gospel. For example, in Old Testament theology, stormy seas or waters represented the chaos that God tamed when God created the world and everything in and around it. Therefore, Jesus calming the storm shows shared power of creation by having power over creation and shows us Who Jesus is.

In Mark's version of Jesus calming the sea, Jesus and his disciples and some other folks set out in boats to go to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which was Gentile territory, and while it may have been God's will, it may not have been the will of the powers Jesus defeated on the cross: the powers of death, the powers of sin, what a lot of folks call evil. Despite what we might feel or believe about evil today, Mark's Gospel often shows the presence of evil in the world that actively fights against Jesus and his mission. Scholars remind us of things like this to suggest that the storm, may have been a tantrum or a fit being pitched by those chaotic evil forces that were against God and against Jesus or an attempt to frighten his followers to stop following him, Jesus calming the storm shows us yet again that Jesus has authority over those powers. God's love is stronger than any force on earth.

There is something about the love of God Jesus embodied and empowers us to live that can threaten those in power and those who profit from the status quo, so much so that they will fight to preserve what they believe is rightfully theirs. That may be – at least in part -- what Mark's storm in our Gospel today is about.

Anyway, there seemed to be something about the storm that caused Jesus' disciples to believe they couldn't live through it, that this storm would be the end of them. Instead of judging the disciples, as commentators have warned against, maybe we can empathize with them. Maybe we have had moments in our lives when we were in the midst of a storm, either a literal storm like the one in today's Gospel or a different kind of storm where it seemed we were over powered, overwhelmed, and could not find a way through, also like the one in today's Gospel. And in the midst of such storms, it is not necessarily unreasonable to ask the question: Doesn't anybody care that I am suffering, afraid, lost, dying? Or to turn to God and ask, Don't you care? The disciples aren't the only ones to ask that question. It appears in some of the

psalms, the ones that lament, where the author of the psalms literally accused God of sleeping while they suffered.

We are all human, so it is normal to experience times when we despair. But the author of Mark seems to be warning us despair is not a place to stay in very long, for it could cloud our vision, so that all we can see is the storm and when all we can see is the storm, we fail, as the Israelites and Jesus disciples failed, to see a way through the storm, or challenge, or whatever you want to compare the storm to. That is why it is so important to remember hope. Hope is the antidote to despair and is what can get us through the storms of life.

In his book about a conversation he had with the Dali Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, titled *The Book of Joy*, Douglas Abrams asked these two inspirational leaders who have seen, experienced, been through, and fought against what could be called evil in the form of oppression, injustice, violence and discrimination - both have even had threats against their lives - about how they resisted falling into despair in a world that is so full of turmoil. Both men said they have hope; which is different from optimism, they see and know the cold hard reality in the world, but hope connects them to and gives them empathy for the sufferer, their shared suffering, and allows them to see the bigger picture, to see where things are changing, where people do step up and do what they can to make things better.

Here is what Archbishop Tutu said about despair and hope: “Despair can come from deep grief, but it can also be a defense against the risks of bitter disappointment and shattering heartbreak. Resignation and cynicism are easier, more self-soothing postures that do not require the raw vulnerability and tragic risk of hope. To choose hope is to step firmly forward into the howling wind, baring one’s chest to the elements, knowing that, in time, the storm will pass.” Archbishop Tutu also warned that despair turns us inward, wanting to save or protect only ourselves, with no care for the other, whereas hope sends us into the arms of the other, causing connection, what some call community.

Perhaps the wisdom of the Archbishop’s words can help inform our understanding of what was going on in Mark’s Gospel, where it seems the disciples were despairing, and part of the cause of their despair was seeing Jesus, who had the power to stop the storm, asleep on pillow, looking like he didn’t care. But maybe stopping the storm wasn’t the ideal way to solve this situation. As my friends who sail tell me when they read this story, if the sea was dead calm, and the disciples had a sail on their boat, as some historians, archeologists and even artists have suggested, that meant the disciples were going to have to work hard rowing or else they wouldn’t be able to move at all, for no sail boat can move over water that is at a dead calm.

Maybe Jesus' sleeping wasn't a sign of being uncaring. Maybe Jesus sleeping was his show of respect and trust in his disciples to handle whatever came up on their way across the Sea of Galilee. Maybe he trusted God and knew that he needed to rest. He had come, after all, to show God's love and empower his followers, to save them from evil by love, not to be a sort of superhero who does it all on his own. Maybe, in the end, Jesus stopped the storm suddenly not to ease the disciples' fear, but to remind them, storms don't last forever but ending the storm was not necessarily a quick fix that got them to their destination. Maybe that is why he asked them about fear and faith.

Maybe it wasn't the storm the disciples were afraid of. Maybe they weren't even afraid of dying. Maybe what they were really afraid of was that Jesus didn't care about them, because he left the task of getting to the far shore to them, even when a storm rose up to threaten them. Maybe they wanted Jesus to prove he cared by being a hero, a strong man, and fix the problem for them.

Maybe that is what makes despair so unhealthy: it is really only another form of attempted manipulation to try and make God be the kind of god we want, instead of letting God be Who God Is, a God of love who made us in love, and loves us so much God gave us free will with the deep hope that we will use that gift to choose love: to choose to love God with our whole being and our neighbors as ourselves. The hope that we will choose to work with God instead of insisting God do all the work to create God's kingdom here on earth, even if we have to go through some storms and face some challenges along the way. God does care, because God has given us everything we need: God's great love, and each other. That doesn't mean we can make someone else make the choice we want them to make, but it does mean we can choose to live God's love and to choose hope instead of despair, which won't make us heroes, but can help us navigate stormy situations, and when those storms are over, we might just discover we traveled through to the other side, to be right where God wants us to be.