

PROPER SEVEN, PENTECOST 5, JUNE 23, 2024

I've done enough boating on Lake Wallenpaupack in Pa and on Lake Gaston in North Carolina to know how quickly storms can arise on a clear day. It's no fun getting caught in one of those storms where you are being pummeled by rain, tossed about on waves and lightening and thunder striking all around. It can make you very fearful of the outcome. So, the analogy of storms with life is an apt one. We all know too well that things can be going swimmingly and then, all of a sudden, and out of the blue, a crisis occurs.

One day you're feeling great and all is right with the world. The next day all hell breaks loose. One day you are filled with contentment and sparkling with possibilities and the next day you're diagnosed with a terminal disease or you have a financial crisis. One day you feel serene and the next the perfect storm hits and gargantuan waves crash over you.

When Jesus and the disciples set out on the Sea of Galilee the weather was pretty fair. You could even say that the seas of Jesus' ministry were also calm that evening. Crowds had gathered around to hear his message and to be healed and at the end of the day life seemed good.

But what started out well didn't end up well. The capricious nature of life slammed down on them and the placid waters of the sea were soon churning into a deadly squall. The disciples were terrified.

With no coast guard to call, no SOS to send out, no cell phone to use, the disciples fall back on what I would call primal prayer or panic prayer. Panic praying is our most vulnerable and sincere prayer. It is prayer in which raw human need grasps for a lifeline from God. It is prayer that comes after all self reliance and self certainty have long since passed. It is the true prayer of the heart. You don't learn this prayer it simply bursts out of you. And it is this kind of prayer that these seasoned, professional fishermen screamed out to Jesus. "Don't you care that we are perishing" they cried.

The disciple's prayer is the prayer screamed at God from the beginning of time. It is the prayer you gasp before undergoing life threatening surgery. It's the prayer you cry when you hear a loved one has died and you pray it isn't so. But it's a prayer that asks God over and over do you care or are you asleep? It is a question that we all ask at some time in our lives.

It is also the reason I hear people reflecting on the absence of God! How can you believe in God when you see the state of the world? The environment is endangered through our neglect. There are wars claiming thousands of lives. Millions more are starving. Terrorism threatens our way of life. There is violence. And God, where is God in all of this? And then on a more personal level one hears. "How can I go on living when the person I love the most has died?" "Why am I sick?" "Why is God doing this to me? I am a good person. I live a good life. Why me?" Why aren't things working out for me the way they should."

These questions are the ones so many people point to as a reason not to believe in God. How can an omnipotent, omniscient, benevolent, and loving God allow evil, chaos, and suffering to exist within God's good creation. And we all know, of course, evil, chaos, and suffering do exist.

Christians have dealt with this question in a way that isn't really helpful. Be good, we're told, and things will go well for you; be bad and bad things will happen. So, if good things are happening, you must be doing right, and if bad things are happening, well, there has to be a reason for that, too. This is a very attractive, indeed compelling, way of looking at life because we all want answers. This means when things go wrong we either lack enough faith or it is a direct punishment from God. The antidote to these concepts is we need to trust more, pray more, worship more so God will grant us some kind of immunity. There is no God given immunity to the crisis' we face in life. God is not a transactional God—it's not true that if we put in a particular behavior then we are guaranteed a particular result. Like a vending machine or an ATM if we put in the right behavior or say the right prayers we can get the result we want. It just doesn't work that way, and if we're honest about it, we all know this. As much as we would like the universe to be clear and simple, the basic facts of our experience pretty much refute these claims. There are no guarantees, one way or the other.

So, the real question we are asking is how do we face the storms in our lives? How do we weather the storms, for they do come? And the truth is God does not promise to cancel out all the storms of our lives. Nor does God promise that we will never face a storm. What God does offer is to be a relational God, a God who offers and seeks relationship with us. The point of this story is that Jesus is in the boat and that he is always there. The promise is not that there will be no storms or that the wind and the storm will stop when we want it to. That's not the way it is, and Mark knew that perfectly well when he told this story.

In fact, the disciples learned quickly enough that they were not immune from any of the tragedies of life—in fact, they seemed especially prone to them. But what the disciples and the Church also learned early on and never forgot was that, wherever they were, and whatever was happening to them, they were not alone. Jesus was there with them, knowing them and loving them and never letting go.

This story tells us what God offers us is a relationship of God's presence and love and not necessarily answers, in the middle of whatever we have to face. Like the disciples, we are never alone, no matter what happens to that boat, or to us.

There's a scene in the movie "Selma," in which Martin Luther King, Jr. visits Mr. Cager Lee, an 82-year-old man who is in the morgue identifying the body of his grandson, Jimmie Lee Jackson. Jimmie had just been killed by a state trooper during a peaceful protest in Selma, Alabama. Dr. King first says, "There are no words," but then, like any preacher, he offers some words. He said, "I can tell you one thing for certain—God was the first to cry."

What God offers Mr. Lee, and what God offers us, is a relationship not as a handy miracle that fixes things, but most often in a gentle reminder that we are not alone, and that God is with us and shares our pain.

Sometimes it's in the midst of all of our pain that we truly find God. I had a professor in seminary whose son had committed suicide and he told us, "I have been to the very bottom of grief, pain, guilt, the very depths of despair and have found my feet on firm ground. Dr. Price referred to God as the Ground of our Being. Suffering and evil don't always lead to a loss of faith. Often, the harsh realities of this broken, disordered world are what *draw* people to seek God. We seek the good because we

experience the bad. We yearn for justice because injustice surrounds us. We pray for calm because chaos brings us to our knees.

So when the storms of life threaten to overcome us, remember the power of God's love and compassion is with us. Even if we cannot find God in those moments we have a long line of people who testify that God stays in the boat, surrounding us, sustaining, supporting, empowering, enabling even the most faint-hearted and fearful a people as we are, to trust in that promise and thus, to withstand the storm. If we look for that, if we look for the loving presence of God in the very heart of whatever is happening, we will find God. We won't always find answers or exemptions or solutions and the outcome might not always be what we want or hope for, but God's presence and power of love is always there. Thanks be God. Amen.