

CALMING THE STORM

(08/28/2022)

Scripture Lesson: Mark 4:35-41

“He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, ‘Peace! Be still!’ Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm.” (Mark 4:39)

Someone recently left a book on my desk downstairs. It was either someone from our church or the cleaning people who, by the way, are doing a great job with my study as well as the church. I assume it was meant as an anonymous gift. The book is *The Oxford Book of Prayer*. Anything that is issued by Oxford University Press, especially when it has to do with religion, is absolutely first rate, and this book, copyrighted in 1985, is no exception.

What I found especially interesting about this book is that, in addition to 257 pages of Christian prayers, it includes prayers from Jewish, Native American, Buddhist, Zoroastrian, Muslim, Baha’i, and other religious or spiritual traditions. It concludes with a section entitled, “Prayers Towards the Unity of Mankind.” If we look past the use of the exclusive term “mankind,” remembering that this was written way back in the 1980’s, I think this is a beautiful and meaningful way to conclude a book on prayer. So, whoever gave me this book, thank you! It is an absolute gem!

One other section of this book immediately caught my attention. In addition to the prayers of the psalmist, the prayers of Jesus, the prayers of Paul, and different kinds of prayers, there is a section entitled “Prayer as Listening.” In the editor’s introduction to this section, the eminent Anglican churchman and theologian George Appleton wrote:

Prayer is a relationship with God. Such relationship presupposes communication from both sides. Not only does a person pray to God in words or unspoken thoughts, but also God communicates with the person in intuitions, often so clear that they can be interpreted into direct speech. At such times God’s initiative is clearly apparent, and the heart is moved to respond in prayer or silent worship, or in inspired and obedient word or action.

I trust you have all had this experience at one time or another, perhaps even during Sunday morning worship. You have the sense that God is communicating with you. Your heart is moved to respond. Or, as John Wesley said, your heart is “strangely warmed.”

Appleton goes on to include a quote from the Danish existential philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard tells us,

The “immediate” person thinks and imagines that when he prays, the important thing, the thing he must concentrate upon, is that God should hear what he is praying for. Yet in the true, eternal sense it is just the reverse: the true relation in prayer is not when God hears what is prayed for, but when the person praying continues to pray until he is the one who hears, who hears what God wills. The “immediate” person, therefore, . . . makes demands in his prayers; the true man of prayer only attends.”

This way of thinking about prayer is congruent with the approach we studied in our Tuesday afternoon Spiritual Study and Growth Group way back when we used to meet, the approach to prayer that was articulated by Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection. In the seventeenth century, Brother Lawrence, a barefoot Carmelite monk, developed a spiritual discipline that came to be called the Practice of the Presence of God.

Brother Lawrence, who was not a highly educated man, became a spiritual giant solely through this spiritual practice. It is simple, something each of us can do. Brother Lawrence believed we should be in constant conversation with God or Jesus, and that this conversation should go both ways: we should listen at least as much as we speak. He maintained that this is really the only spiritual discipline and the only type of prayer that we need to practice.

The heart of our Christian faith is not holding a set of orthodox beliefs or even attending church regularly (though, of course, I hope you do!); it is deepening our relationship with God through Christ. The Practice of the Presence of God is based on our awareness of God’s presence within us. Our conversation with God shapes our soul through a constant dialogue with that God who is the center of our own individual life and also the center of the entire universe. As we open ourselves to God, talk with God, *and listen to God*, we allow God to create us. Then, through us, God can create a new world!

Many years ago, the newspaper counselor, Ann Landers, was asked if there was any one problem or theme that predominated in the thousands of letters that she received every week. Without hesitation, she replied that the one problem that stands out above all others is the problem of fear.

Ann Landers said that many people are afraid. They are afraid of losing their health. They are afraid of losing their wealth. They are afraid of losing their job. They are afraid of losing their loved ones through divorce or death. They are afraid of change, even when their present situation is intolerable. (BTW, I know many people who fall in this category. It’s sad.)

Many people in our youth-oriented culture are afraid to grow old. They are afraid of the many afflictions, both physical and mental, that can accompany old age. They are afraid of death. They are afraid that, on their deathbed, when they look back over their life, they will see

quite clearly that it has been wasted. They fear, at the point of their death, hearing that inner voice that spoke to Ivan Ilyich in Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. When Ivan was on his deathbed, the voice of his soul spoke to him. It said, "You did it all wrong." I think this would be my greatest fear, the fear that on my deathbed my soul would whisper to me that I did it all wrong, that I missed the point of my life, that I wasted the precious life that God had given to me.

The people of whom Ann Landers speaks are basically afraid of life, of the storms of life, the storms from without and, also, the storms within, the storms that rise up within us, the storms that each of us will inevitably experience. It seems to me that people who are flooded with this kind of fear, this kind of generalized anxiety, must be facing life without being conscious of the loving presence and guidance of that God who dwells within. They must be facing life without Christ.

I find it interesting that many of the people who suffer from excessive fear or anxiety claim that they are Christians and may even be listed as members of a church. I wonder how many of them talk with God or Jesus in their daily life. I suspect that most fearful people do not practice this spiritual discipline. Or, if they do, they don't listen.

This morning, we are returning to our ongoing Bible study of the Gospel of Mark. We are not exactly rushing through this book, but that's not the point. The scripture reading that we heard or read this morning from the 4th chapter of Mark, the account of Jesus calming the storm, could be the description of an actual event in Jesus' life and in the lives of the disciples. Its inclusion, with only minor variations, in all three synoptic gospels indicates that it was an important part of the oral tradition that had been passed down from the disciples to the three churches out of which the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke were written.

If this happened literally, it indicates that God or Jesus has power over nature. The disciples were amazed that "even the wind and the rain obey him." This protective aspect of God's love was probably especially comforting to people who lived in a time and a land that were especially vulnerable to the forces of nature. By the way, we like to think this no longer applies to us. However, as we become increasingly aware of the effects of human-induced climate change—the droughts, floods, melting glaciers, loss of habitats for thousands of species of precious animals, and as we are confronted with the apparently unsolvable problem of pandemics, we realize that we have not come as far as we naively believed in our "battle" against nature!

The scripture passage could be read and understood literally, historically, as something Jesus did that was witnessed by his disciples. It could also be read as a metaphor, as a story that contains a message for us both psychologically and spiritually.

If we read the account of this incident in the lives of Jesus and his disciples as metaphor, it tells us that in our journey through life we sometimes encounter unexpected storms, storms that threaten to capsize our little boat. This is what happened to the disciples. They felt overwhelmed by forces beyond their control. Mark notes that their fear was exacerbated by their belief that they had to go through this difficult trial alone.

Jesus was in the boat with the disciples, but it took them a while to remember this. It was as if he were asleep. Perhaps the disciples were the ones who were asleep in that they were not conscious of his presence. Believing they were alone; they were filled with fear. The disciples reacted just as many of us would do. They panicked! They despaired!

Then the disciples remembered something. They remembered that Jesus was very near to them. If only they could awaken him, the storm would subside. They talked to him. He awoke, and they once again experienced the calm of those whose lives are centered in God.

I don't know if Jesus literally stilled the storm on the lake. He could very well have done this. As my father used to say when we discussed a passage of scripture like this, if there were one person in the history of civilization who could have stilled the storm, it would have been Jesus. However, even if Jesus was able to do this, I am not particularly impressed. Of all the things Jesus did and said, stilling the storm is low on my list of importance. It's impressive, but it doesn't make the world a better place or me a better person.

Jesus may or may not have stilled an actual storm, a squall that suddenly sprang up while they were out on the lake. However, I do believe he stilled the storm within the disciples. I don't have a lot of evidence that God goes out of his way to manipulate nature, to make life safer or easier for us. I don't believe that God sent Jesus into the world to remove or eliminate obstacles. I believe that God in Christ is there to comfort us, to guide us, to strengthen our faith that we might not only carry our burdens, but that the burdens we carry might shape our soul.

We need to remember that during the stormy times of our life Jesus is with us in our little boat. All we need to do is awaken him. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that we need to awaken *to* him, that we need to become conscious of his presence. How do we do this? We do this by talking with him both in our worship service and in our daily life. Then, during the conversation, we take time to listen. When we do this, we become conscious of his presence both with and within us.

Brother Lawrence tells us how we can do this. All we need to do is practice the presence of God. We begin by opening ourselves to Christ's presence within us. Then we can talk with

him and listen to him. Whether we picture this spiritual presence as God or as Jesus, what is important is that we talk to him *and that we listen*. This practice helps us become conscious of his guiding presence during the storms, the difficult periods of our life.

F. W. Boreham, the great Christian missionary, relates an incident that occurred during the early days of his ministry in Australia. Reverend Boreham went to call on one of his elderly parishioners. Entering the room where the old man lay, he noticed a chair pulled up beside the man's bed. "I see that I am not your first visitor today," said Boreham.

The old man told him that he was. Boreham then asked about the chair. The old man explained that, when he was a small boy, he had difficulty praying. His pastor suggested that he place an empty chair next to him when he prayed and pretend that Jesus was sitting in that chair like an attentive friend. The old man said it worked for him as a child, and that he had maintained the practice ever since.

Boreham stayed for a while, prayed with his parishioner, and then left. A few days later, the man's daughter came to tell him her father had died. "I was out of the room only for a short time," said the daughter. "When I returned, he was gone. There was no change in him, except I noticed that his hand was resting on the empty chair."

When the storms of life arise, whether they are external storms or internal storms, storms that rise within you, put your hand in Jesus' hand. Talk to him. Listen to him. Let him calm the storms of your life, or at least give you the strength and courage to bear them. When you do this, you are practicing the deepest kind of prayer.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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