



Sleeping On The Job?
2 Corinthians 6:1-13; Mark 4:35-41
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (June 20, 2021)

The metaphor of the storm for life's challenges has been used pretty commonly throughout the centuries. Even our Lutheran tradition, we might say, finds its origins in a storm. In fact, as a young law student, Martin Luther promised to dedicate himself to God as a priest if his life were spared during a lightning storm.

No matter how much we protest about the presence of storms in our life, they are there with all their disruptive and potentially devastating force and their ability to transform the landscape for good. How do we navigate them? How do we handle ourselves and our fears?

It's easy to experience and praise God when the sky is blue, when we walk in a beautiful forest, when we admire the vastness of the ocean, and when we breath in the glory of a new dawn. It's easy to see God at work in the kindness of a stranger, in the joy of children at play, and in the serene intimacy of a loving couple. It's surely hard to find God in the destructive power of nature, in the nonsensical acts of cruelty and abuse, in the violence of war and crime, in the greed of lust and jealousy.

During my life, I have experienced storms and had to overcome challenges but I was never in life threatening situations. I don't know what I would do and how I would react if I were among the masses being bombed and the throng of people trekking miles as a migrant or refugee of war. The thought itself is terrorizing.

According to today's gospel, though Jesus is present in the boat yet sleeps through a raging storm, the disciples doubt his care and power: "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" Don't we raise that very question when we find ourselves in the eye of the storm? His presence seems far too detached and dormant to help us. What should we make of God's silence and aloofness? What do we do when chaos engulfs our lives? Is it possible that our faith is stretched and required to grow exactly in those vulnerable moments when we fail to experience God's almighty power? Is it God's weakness that perhaps we are forced to consider? And who needs a weak God, anyway?

Some versions of Christianity teach us that suffering is a result of faithlessness. If only we'd believe more, trust more, pray more, worship more, then God would grant us the immunity that is our true Christian birthright. Some churches teach its members that chaos and suffering are direct punishments from God. We have heard a similar line from those who assert that Covid-19 is God's response to our immoral living. People who face painful trials in such churches are exhorted to confess their "secret" sins and return to holy living, so that God will relent and forgive them. In other words, their message is that suffering is God's teaching opportunity to impress on us the consequence of our sinful choices.



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Although we may learn about ourselves and about our destructive ways during challenging times, Jesus' God does not teach us through punishment and suffering but through grace and forgiveness. Our suffering is never God's choice. God's choice is that of always accompanying us even through the most hateful of experiences, including torture and death by the cross.

We do go through different cycles in life. We move from happy and serene moments, when the presence of God is evident and we can say a lot about God (*the "Via Positiva" or the Positive Way of experiencing and expressing about God; this is the "seen" God, the Deus revelatus or the God revealed*), to challenging and at times tragic moments where we not only can't say a pleasant word about God but we even doubt God's very closeness (*the "Via Negativa" or the Negative Way, which focuses on what God is not; this is about "the back-side of God," the Deus absconditus or the hidden God*)¹.

What do you do when life sucks? What helps you to stay afloat? Where do you turn for meaning?

In our Gospel reading from Mark this week, Jesus's disciples offer us yet another iteration of this all-too-human cyclical flow. The setting is late evening on the Sea of Galilee, a body of water 680 feet below sea level, surrounded by hills, and prone to sudden, violent windstorms. After a long day spent preaching, Jesus is curled up at the stern of a boat, sleeping soundly as his disciples steer the vessel. Other boats are accompanying the disciples to the other side. All at once, the winds pick up, huge waves lash the boat, and the disciples, fear for their lives. But this is quite curious and distressing: shouldn't they have the skills to predict the storm? Shouldn't they know how to navigate raging waters? And what about us? We also seem to lose touch with our skills, experience, and faith in God when we cross troubling waters. We seem to incur into a kind of faith amnesia.

In desperation, the disciples rouse the still-sleeping Jesus: "Teacher, don't you care that we are drowning?" To be honest, more than a question this is an accusation.

Is the existence of chaos in our life a proof of God's apathy, God's coldness, God's indifference, and maybe even God's non-existence? Is it possible that God can make a new creation out of the primordial chaos?² Is it conceivable that God can grant freedom to a people suffering the inhumanity of four hundred years of slavery in Egypt?³ Hasn't our God helped the people of Israel in exile in Babylon to create a new life for themselves, a life meant to bless even their own

¹ [Luther, Martin | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy \(utm.edu\)](#)

² See Genesis 1-2, Job 38-40

³ Exodus 3



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captors?⁴ Have we forgotten that Jesus's entire ministry on earth is steeped in the "chaos" of power grabbing elites and rocked boats? When we are in the middle of a frightening storm, it looks like our anxiety has the best of us and we don't seem to have easy access to the many memories and experiences of divine interventions in our life as beloved individuals and as a saved people.

It's not a sin to ask God hard questions. God welcomes questions. It's not unfaithful to wonder "Why?" or "When?" or "How much longer?" It's not wrong to be afraid; God has wired us to experience fear when we're threatened. We are wired for survival, and we are wired for connection with others and with the spiritual realm.

The problem isn't fear; the problem is where fear leads. When my fear takes over, my first reaction is to freeze up and I become convinced that I'm alone. All capacity for reflection gets put on hold or disappears altogether. In those moments, it is easy to doubt God's presence let alone God's favor. It's easy to see God in the beauty of creation, at work in acts of kindness and generosity, in a smile, in the joy of children at play. It's a different story when creation is perceived as a threat: we have a hard time seeing God's presence there. And when there is greed, betrayal, abuse, and even violence? How can we see God there? How can we trust God is watching out for us?

During those terror inducing moments, during natural phenomena which have the potential of becoming a tragedy, or during social exploitation, conflicts, and oppression, faith is tested, trust in God is on the scale. Is that why Christians pray every day: "Lead us not into temptation"? this translation, however, may mislead us into thinking that it is God tempting or allowing us to be tempted. A better translation is: "Save us from trial." God does not want us to go solo. We are called into a relationship of trust with God. We are invited to lean into that intimate unity with God. But God does not want to force it on us. We must be ready for it. We must want it.

Often times, it's the hardships of life that turn people to God. And we, together with the disciples, find ourselves awe-struck before the living God who has met us in our weakness and yet overcome it. "Who then is this?" but the Lord of all! The God who in the beginning brought order to the chaotic forces of the world now in Christ brings peace as we face the storm. Jesus is capable of seeing beauty and meaning in a mustard seed. To farmers, that spells only chaos and extra work. To Jesus, the mustard seed grown into a tree and welcoming birds in its branches is a sample of the kingdom, capable of giving shade and shelter to the tired and the scared.

⁴ Genesis 12:3; Isaiah 58; Esther 2; but especially Jeremiah 29:4-6



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So why are we afraid? What stops us from the ways of Jesus? Have we still no faith in this seemingly helpless Lord who is our only help? Jesus is just as present in the raging water as he is in the soothing calm that follows. He is in the boat with us, approachable, still available.

What makes us lose all confidence when the sky darkens and the waves swell? God's promises are just as true now as they were before. God doesn't change. Have we? What soothes us and restores our trust in God? Is it prayer? The Word of God? The community of saints? The sacraments? That is how grace touches us and strengthens us for "the times of trial," empowering us to trust the caring presence of God in any storm.

In his great tenderness, Jesus waits until the nightmare is over before he invites his disciples to take spiritual inventory. "Why are you afraid?" he asks them. This question is not an accusation but an invitation to take stock, to reflect, to learn, to grow. Why are we afraid? What false assumptions have we come to believe about the character of God? We trust the Emmanuel, God-with-us. Can we trust God is *always* with us? Do we have the expectation that faith means that God will do things for us? Is our prayer a manipulation, a bartering skill?

When I am overcome by fear, I need to remind myself to breathe, center myself in prayer, and find solid ground in God. Exercise, a bike ride, and meditation also help.

Resilience is not just about surviving adversity; it's about being improved by it. In her diary, Anne Frank thus reflected: "It's really a wonder that I haven't dropped all my ideals, because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet I keep them, because in spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart."⁵ One must be really in touch with one's own depth, with one's own identity of being one with all other beings and not separated in essence from one another. This gives us confidence and trust that we all belong to God, and nothing can separate us from God's love.

The deep peace and joy, the endurance, the generosity, and the openness of heart in vulnerable times ground us in the eternal Being. When we are set free of fear, we are capable of loving anew and moving forward once again.

It's after the boat fills with water that the disciples are "filled with a great awe." It's after Jesus accompanies them in the chaos that they realize who he is. May the same be true of us. Amen.

⁵ Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl*