

5th Sunday of Pentecost
Sermon 6.23.24

Job 38:1-11

Then the Lord answered Job out of the **whirlwind**: ‘Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

‘Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb?— when I made the clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band, and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors, and said, “Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped”?

Mark 4:35-41

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great **windstorm** arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” 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. He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” (310)

Jesus asleep this week reminds me of the sower asleep last week.

Last week, the parable we heard, Jesus comparing the kingdom of God to when a sower of seeds sowed some seeds, which then went ahead and grew, day and night, when the sower was awake and when the sower was asleep. The preaching point is that the kingdom has its way whether we work for it or not. It’s a point I made and a point every other preacher I talked to this week made, and there were quite a few of those. I had my monthly clergy group this week and we all said as much, that the kingdom of God will make its way in the world whether we work for it or not.

It’s not an easy thing to trust—not for any of the preachers who preached it nor for our congregants, some of them anyway, some of *you* anyway. I got a little push back on it. I myself felt less than convicted in preaching it, that the kingdom of God will have its way of the world, eventually, whether we labor for it or not, God at work in all things for good, which is a scandalous thing to believe.

No, it's not an easy thing to trust, especially among people like us, Americans, American Protestants, American Protestants of the more progressive wing of the church. We think most of everything comes down to our efforts, and fails at our efforts' lack.

But here's something: there's a correlation found in the four-day work week with a lessening of environmental stressors and even carbon pollution. This is a new labor movement trend, the reconsideration of the once-standard forty-hour workweek. Were the standard work week to go from forty hours over five days to thirty-two hours over four days, we'd be as productive at our task (studies show this) but we'd be less *stressing* and *stressful*, stressed out.

It seems our work as of now is productive both of wealth and of waste.

So, maybe there is some merit in our sleeping.

Maybe good *can* progress if we just stay home, take it easy.

The Lord's sleeping, though...?

Jesus seems to have taken his parable too close to heart.

It's significant that this event happens just as he's said to them that they should go across to the other side, which, geographically speaking, would have taken them from the Jewish side of the sea to the Gentile side. This might have escaped your noticed. It isn't, on the face of it, so notice-worthy a thing, except to the degree that they would seem to be among Gentiles, no small thing that. But when taken from within the larger context of Mark's gospel, it's even more significant.

Mark remembers Jesus as on the move a lot. Mark's Jesus is active, his writing of him is efficient to the point of terse. Mark conveys in just a few words an event that, in the other synoptic gospels, Matthew and Luke, would take up a few verses.

This is related to the fact that, according to Mark, Jesus has immediate effect. *Euthus* is the word in Greek to convey immediacy, an action that has no medium or mediation, that is direct, momentous. The presence of Jesus, the movement of Jesus: these are effective and unmistakable. He is the very presence of the kingdom of God, and his arrival in place changes everything.

Similar is his movement, significant beyond the plain face of it all. He moves not just from one place to another, from here to there. He moves more suggestively from in to out, from one side to the other. He is constantly entering into a house or into a village, and then out of the village, out of a given place, out sometimes even into the wilderness, which is a place beyond knowing, or onto the sea, which is a place of potential violence, chaos. He's constantly moving from one side to the other side, as if to keep in play his own perspective or to unfix his point of

view. This is all to suggest Jesus as someone who doesn't mean to bless our sacred canopies or to ordain our structuring of things. He doesn't mean to adopt just one outlook or to maintain just a single standpoint.

A sacred canopy: this is a term Peter Berger came up with, a sociologist of religion, in order to name one way religion or the sacred comes to function amidst a people. He explained it: "Religion is a sacred canopy stretching over society, providing a shield that protects people from the uncertainties, meaninglessness and pointlessness of life, by helping them interpret and make sense of the world and their position in it."

And it was quite a literal thing when it came to the people Israel, whose sacred canopy manifest in tents, tabernacles, the temple curtain. These were all actual canopies that the people used throughout their centuries to demarcate themselves as set apart from the rest of the world, to feel themselves as under God in a particular and important way.

And Jesus would have been raised within this. As a Jew, he'd have found shelter under such sacred canopies, whether referred to in Torah or actual in practice. But as a man, and as the coming-into-consciousness of the Messiah, this one to come who would be a light even to the Gentiles, he would also emerge from that canopy, he would declare all the world as potent in serving as God's holy place, all people as potent for being God's holy people.

It's the sort of sudden exposure that could shock, *should* shock.

Just so, it wouldn't go smoothly. The world wouldn't take it well. Turns out, there is much in the world that would fight back against the presence of the holy, that would claim this turf as theirs powerfully to occupy. Even the seas would storm and rage at the presence of God's overpowering peace. (Now there's a notion: overpowering peace.)

Though this would hardly rankle Jesus. He'd really taken it to heart—that the kingdom of God will present itself powerfully even if the sower of the kingdom is fast asleep.

The disciples weren't nearly as convinced.

This storm was very likely real. Storms could come across the Sea of Galilee, which is just as often referred to as a lake. Nonetheless, storms could come across it with such ferocity as to frighten those in small vessels, as this one surely was, even to frighten fishermen, as these men surely were, experience in the sea and its sometimes-sudden ways. The waves were swamping it, and once a boat begins to take on water, things can go from risky to dangerous to catastrophic quickly.

But heightening the tension was perhaps that the sea was understood as a sight of potential chaos. The stories that cast it as such were abundant. The primordial chaos imagined before God began to create was a darkened deep. The reversion to chaos that the story of Noah imagined was one of a rising sea. The Leviathan—that is, evil cast as monstrous—was a monster of the sea, slithering destruction at its depth, and surfacing in terrifying, unexpected ways. War is described in scripture as a terrifying tide, one you can't turn back. Locusts, crop-destroying pests, are described as terrible flood, one that will destroy everything. A stormy sea is in the Psalms like when malice and slander become the only accepted narrative about you, or like when suspicion becomes attack and nothing can argue against its insistence. The sea when it becomes stormy makes the horizon of concern so immediate you can't think, you can't fruitfully do, you can only react, and maybe wrongly.

Primed with such equations, a stormy sea and all that's terrifying: at what point do confident fishermen become afraid that tumult will only magnify in tumult? Maybe it takes the wisdom and experience of fishermen to know when a swamping could kill.

A couple years ago, early in spring, I decided to have a fire at our back yard fire pit.

The kids had made it on the first night of Covid, just when they'd called school off for two weeks. Two weeks! Can you imagine no school for two weeks? In a flight of merriment, Tobias and Jack and their friend Teagan burrowed in the back woods to unearth a whole neighborhood's worth of discarded materials. And they built a very ramshackle fire pit, old stones, concrete blocks, broken pavers and cracked bricks.

Two years later, we used it still, from time to time. But grass had grown over its edges, edges that I failed to realize were conceptual more than functional. I could see the line between firepit and lawn, but fire wouldn't. Not necessarily.

(It didn't.)

I lit the fire and watched it grow, off the initial pile of kindling, spreading to the wider pit, to brush gathered over time.

As it neared the edge of the pit itself, though, biting away at all the fuel, it caught the top of a long-grown blade of grass, dry from winter, rooted on the other side of the barrier. And that gave light to another piece, which gave light to another piece. I tried to stamp it out, but it didn't grow in a line; it grew like a puddle, widening in its reach. And I hadn't brought out the hose. And I hadn't even turned the water on from its winter hibernation.

Why hadn't I done that?

My mind went from pit to lawn to neighbors' houses. It might be only a matter of moments until it chewed away at everything. "Help!" I began to scream. "Jesse! Anyone!" My shame at doing the very thing I'd always nagged the kids *not to do* mattered nothing. I needed help.

They were already at it. Jess had seen it all from the kitchen, had gone to the basement to turn the water on. Tobias was hurrying to bring out the hose. We got it under control, a year's worth of terror pressed into three minutes, maybe two.

I don't doubt the disciples' terror at a sudden squall even on a small lake, even with the shore usually within sight. The waves *were* coming over the edges, which might make it only a matter of time, short time.

"Do you not care that we are perishing?" comes the question. It could be anyone's prayer, any of ours at nearly any time.

"Do you not care that we are perishing?"

And if the god we imagined ourselves addressing were the god as encountered by Job, in the book of Job, we might assume the answer's "No." This God, as Job experienced him, was more about his own righteous action than about human need. "Gird your loins and take it like a man!" he said before diving into a diatribe pocked with sarcasm.

Which is part of the puzzle that is the Book of Job. Here we have a righteous man who obeyed every aspect of God's dictates for the righteous life. This is stated at the outset. When the Lord met with his counsel and together they noticed Job, his joyful obedience, his happy faithfulness, it was Satan as the member of this many-membered counsel who informed God that Job's obedience was due to the fact of his good fortune. He was faithful to God because life for him had been good. But what would happen if misfortune came for him? How faithful would he be then, if he lost everything he ever loved, lost even his good health, which would all amount to losing his good name?

One of the oldest books in the Bible, whose frame (the first two chapters and the last one) might well be the oldest passage in scripture, Job the book begs questions still pressing today. Why do bad things happen to good people? Which comes first, righteousness or good fortune? Is good fortune reward for first-coming righteousness, or is righteousness best a possibility when you've had good fortune? And where is God when things turn tragic, when things turn destructive and apparently meaningless?

In Job, we're dealing with an understanding of God, an experience of God, that would seem to have God care very little about how his creatures are faring. I mean, "Gird up your loins

like a man”? This, God is said to have said when Job has lost everything, when his friends insisted it must surely be due to something he did (or didn’t do), and when he refused to confess to wrongdoing he didn’t do but also refused to refuse God, when he instead merely demanded an audience with God, merely demanded the respect of response.

And the response, as far as its content is concerned, was hardly comforting. But the fact of response: this isn’t nothing. Response is, after all, the renewal of a promise. Promise is rendered in Latin as *spond*. So, *re-spond* is to renew a promise.

I remember that whenever I hear someone calling out for a response. Whether what answer I have to give is exactly what they probably want, the mere fact of response is itself a renewal.

“Lord, do you not care that we are perishing?”

Lord, do you not care that I am afraid?

Jesus does a bit better than the shaming response the Lord is heard to have offered Job, but not a whole lot. That he was asleep: he took to heart the promise that sleep doesn’t make less God’s presence and work in the world, this God who neither slumbers nor sleeps, who is as ever at work in all things for good, that we need not be afraid, not even amidst the storms of life that though seem to have the power to destroy. Okay, we can understand him being asleep. Good for him, so strong of faith.

But when he woke up...?

He reserves his harshest response for the storm itself, for the violence that sneaks up, or suddenly descends, and overtakes everything. “Be quiet,” he said, and then, “Shut up!” a more accurate translation than what tends to get rendered in our English Bibles.

The disciples at least don’t get rebuked in this way.

But Jesus does seem to expect they’d have come to unshakeable faith, the sort of faith that can have you sleep through storms, maintain peace amidst utter and terrible tumult, or constant attack, or enduring, sneaking suspicion.

But they were only beginning to have followed Jesus. Indeed, we are in but the beginning of the story, and the thing that made faith of the sort Jesus seems to have expected hadn’t yet happened in story time, hadn’t even begun to be spoken of: the Resurrection. It’s the Resurrection of Jesus that would have human imagining made all the more grand as to what’s possible, as to what indeed we can even count on. It’s the Resurrection that would have us better imagine what God is truly like and is aiming for, less about telling us to quit whining and to take it like a man,

and more about himself come to take it like a man and one crucified, taking indeed the world at its worst and responding not in kind but in kindness, returned, alive though not for vengeance but rather for walking again among us to bring us closer to God and to one another.

We're not there in the story. The disciples weren't there yet in story-time. They needed Jesus to wake up, to behave less like a man of remarkable faith and more like the God who neither slumbers nor sleeps, the God they weren't even yet understanding might truly be present in this mere peasant from Palestine.

It's a wild idea, wild indeed, insisting that the sacred canopy under which we find shelter and shape, meaning and belonging, might rather be the whole wild world. Rest assured, Jesus will come in—into our sanctuaries, into our abodes, into the structures by which we feel safe in the world. But just as often he'll call us out.

Do you remember as a kid, playing, hiding, and the one who was "it" would call because it was time to come out from your hiding place, "Ollie, ollie in come free!"

Maybe it's safe.

Thanks be to God.