

Surviving Storms Mark 4:35-41 Rev. Brian Bagley-Bonner

Storms in life are inevitable, both those that cause lightening, wind and rain to pummel us and those which send thunder into our souls and shake our very foundations. It is tough to deal with storms because they shock us with reminders of our vulnerability and sometimes even our mortality, as the disciples showed in our reading. People of Faith have wrestled with how to deal with the storms of life - the struggles, the pain, the set-backs, the loss of dreams and hopes. It is no surprise then that the Bible has a lively and rich debate about what causes storms and how to survive them.

The first question scripture tackles when it comes to the storms of life is why they happen. The Book of Job relates a long debate on this topic between Job and his friends, and eventually God enters the discussion. Job's friends believe that all difficulties in life are a result of punishment from God for sins committed. When Job loses everything – his family, his wealth... they counsel him to confess his sins to God so the punishment will stop. But Job knows that, though he is not perfect, he has not changed how he has been living, and so he rejects their counsel and says, “the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord.” At the end of the book, God chastises the friends for their simplistic thinking. Then God turns to the honest Job and also challenges him saying essentially, “I am God, you are not.” Just a note on the Book of Job, the inflicter of the pain is an angel called “The Accuser” or in Hebrew “ha-Satan.” God gives this angel the power to afflict Job. And so the Book of Job argues that God is not the inflicter of trouble for those who are righteous, but does allow it.

So far we have heard two of scripture's theories of why bad things happen – 1) God initiates these things according to Job's friends and 2) The Book of Job suggests God allows the Accuser to test people. I want to add a third that is implied in scripture but not quite so specific. It is found in Genesis 1:1 - “ In the beginning... was a formless void and darkness.” Random Chaos is the first thing identified in Genesis 1. Now God goes on to tame the chaos according to Genesis, but we now know that the Genesis story with its closed earth-centered system - where the stars are painted on the dome of the sky and water is stored in the sky, is

not reality. We know now that, for whatever reason, God did not tame all of chaos. There are still random creative events of the universe; stars are still being made, planets still being formed. And so a third Biblical theory of why bad things happen is found in the belief, that in making creation dynamic and free, including free will for humanity, God allows storms to happen because random things happen – that is the nature of life in the universe.

Whichever of these theories strike a cord with you, we still face the second question; how do we deal with storms when they come? There are also several possibilities in scripture for this question. The first is to blame God. Job's wife suggests Job "Curse God and die" (she's not wishing he would die she just thinks is the inevitable outcome of cursing God). Now you may be surprised to hear that as a Biblical option, but remember the Bible is an honest human document. I did not say the Bible recommends it, but it is in there. And I am glad. When people face an unimaginable horror, whether it is tragically losing a child or the Holocaust – if one believes God controls everything, or at the very least has the power to intervene and stop things but doesn't, then blaming God is very reasonable. And here is the thing, if one needs a focus for anger, God is a good choice, because God can take it. God has very big shoulders. In my work in hospice I often gave people permission to be angry with God because anger is the most honest emotion, and God values honesty in interactions – Being honest with God about anger is often the first step to experiencing God's healing.

The second possibility in honest emotion is to cry to God and ask for change, for relief from whatever you are facing. The Psalms are full of this kind of response. Also the disciples in the boat– "wake up Jesus, don't you care that we're about to die!" Honest cries to God are one of the most important ways to pray. These are often the prayers that come from inside us even before we think or understand much about what we face. They are a cry for God to be with us, to stand by us, as we face the struggle before us.

A third possibility is modeled for us in the Garden of Gethesemane. Jesus- anxious even unto death, says, "O God, remove this cup from me..." Jesus is honest with God about not wanting to go forward with the crucifixion but he then adds the next caveat, " "nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done." It is an acceptance that God's will ultimately will result in the

most healing, the most wholeness, the most peace. This is not easy to get to. But Jesus, though he chides the disciples in the boat for their lack of faith, knows that he must name his fear to be honest in his prayer.

The final Biblical response is one of total Acceptance of what happens. Job's response, "God gave, God took away, blessed is the Name of God," is a powerful example of this. But it is not easy for Job to maintain as he struggles to understand why all this has happened to him. Another more lyrical way to say this was on a wall-hanging I saw recently at Miller's Amish Restaurant. (No goods and services have been received for this mention in the sermon). Anyway, the wall hanging said, "Life isn't about waiting for the storm to pass, it's about learning to dance in the rain." Facing the struggle head on and seeing in it the possibilities. An amazing example of this kind of faith and acceptance was expressed by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in his last speech before he was assassinated:

"Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live - a long life; longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. So I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

Powerful and prophetic – these words ring with faith and truth, and inspire us to keep working towards that dream that God, and Rev. King, showed us.

When we face the storms of life, whether they are small and personal, or world-wide and cataclysmic, we have many Biblical ways we can respond. And God is big enough and gracious enough, and creative enough to accept and work with any response we offer. And no matter how we react or what we say to God, God stands by us in the storms. God's heart breaks with our at the trials and horrors we face. God will never abandon us.

Julian of Norwich was a mystic who lived in 1300's. She prayed for a sickness unto death while still young so she could experience all that a body and soul experience in death but

without actual death—so that she live more mindful of God. Her prayer was answered and Julian becomes deathly ill. Everyone believes she is dying. The last rites are administered.

Then at the crisis of her sickness, between four and nine one afternoon, she receives fifteen “showings,” or revelations. She reports that heaven opens to her, she beholds Christ in his glory, and she sees the meaning and power of his sufferings. In her thirteenth showing, Julian receives a comforting answer to a question that has long troubled her. she writes:

“In my folly, before this time I often wondered why, by the great foreseeing wisdom of God, the onset of sin was not prevented: for then, I thought, all should have been well.... But Jesus, who in this vision informed me of all that is needed by me, answered with these words and said: ‘It was necessary that there should be sin; but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.’ These words were said most tenderly, showing no manner of blame to me.” With these words of assurance Julian understands she now can be joyful in all circumstances, however adverse, and for no reason, except this: that all things will ultimately be put right by Christ. She recovered to live thirty-three years longer. But her great joy is sharing those visions in written form so we can know the power of Christ’s words to her. May they seep deep into our souls so that when the storms come, we can find strength

‘all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.’ amen

Mark 4:35-41

³⁵On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” ³⁶And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. ³⁷A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. ³⁸But 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?” ³⁹He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. ⁴⁰He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” ⁴¹And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”