

Faith that Brings Calm When Chaos Threatens based on Mark 4:35-41, David Jahnke, 4/26/15

When I was in seminary, I was astonished by my professor's Calvinist perspective on natural disasters. I think we young folks were complaining about assigning natural disasters to God. And my professor said something along the lines of, "You prefer the alternative? That they, and other forms of suffering are outside of God's control, free and on the loose?" That really struck me. I was not convinced but it was definitely worth pondering.

This is related to a difficult text from Romans I brought up last week in which Paul says that God has subjected creation to futility and decay. Paul says God did this so that creation, in its longing and yearning, might turn to what is unseen, that is to God, and receive salvation.

My professor and Paul are wanting to preserve the absolute sovereignty of God. Now whether God is directly causing these things or not is a different and more nuanced matter; many of them not. But the point is that when nothing is outside of God's sovereign power, nothing is beyond God's control or God's power to redeem and transform.

Now there are reasons to feel as if these things are outside of God's control which brings us to today's gospel lesson. The disciples have set off on a boat with Jesus who proceeds to nod off in the stern, despite an impending storm. The storm hits and threatens to overturn the boat but Jesus keeps on snoring. The disciples become afraid and wake him up, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" So the Son of God, whose power was known by the disciples was sleeping in the midst of a threatening situation.

The sense that God sometimes sleeps goes back at least 2500 years when the author of Psalm 44 mentioned it. At the time, probably either the Assyrian or the Babylonian invasion of Israel, both of which were horrific. So the author had a sense that God's people were being led out like sheep to the slaughter because God was not with the armies of Israel.

Why God would do this or allow this is a great mystery. But there was never any doubt that a God was sovereign and thus somehow responsible for what was happening.

God's providence is a mystery but He provided me with another little providential sign which I would like to share with you. The gospel lesson reminded me of Romans chapter 8 and eventually Psalm 44 as I read about Jesus being asleep. And where does a commentator on this Psalm lead me? Right back full circle to Romans chapter 8 in which Paul quotes Psalm 44 in reference to how the apostles were like sheep being led to the slaughter. So Christians, like the Israelites suffer tragically. But hear how Paul concludes:

38 I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers... will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Jesus suffered and then died on the cross to show us that God is with us in our suffering; and to show that there is nothing beyond the reach of God's love and providential power to save. And the resurrection means that no matter what we have to suffer, we will rise up from the ashes.

Without this, storms big and small fill us with fear. It can seem like we are on a little boat by ourselves in a raging sea with no one around to help. We can feel like people do not really care and perhaps are even against us. Our fight or flight instinct rises up when we are afraid and we become verbally or emotionally or physically violent or try to run away from or otherwise respond poorly to challenging or painful or emotionally trying situations.

We must always remember that Jesus is in the boat. And he can, if he so wills, bring calm to the external situation. But his command to the wind and waves is to us as well. We are the ones who have to "Be quiet and be still!" By remembering God and remaining calm, we become a part of God's bringing calm and peace to life storms— our own and those of others.

And did you notice that there were other boats? I had never noticed that before this reading. This is a reminder that more often than not, those around us who go through similar things; they care deeply for us; and if we were feeling desperate, they would be willing to do most anything to help save us.

Because Christians do, of course, encounter evil forces. This week is the 100th anniversary of the start of a genocide of Christians in Armenia during WW I. And it seems every week there is a new attack on our Christian brothers and sisters in the middle east or northern Africa or South Asia. It is so awful and heart-wrenching and scary. Just as the Israelites cried out as they were being slaughtered 2500 and 70 years ago; so we cry out with our brothers' and sisters and their families to wake up and protect our brothers and sisters and change the hearts and minds of the wicked. "Don't you care, Lord, that they are dying?"

But we remember that this was the cry of Jesus from the cross as well. "My God, my God we hast thou forsaken me?" Jesus knew what was ahead and was tempted to avoid the cross. But he trusted that he, the lamb of God, had to be slaughtered so that he could be raised. This is the concrete event in history by which we know that even in those times when the dead calm is not that of the waves of chaos and destruction being stilled in our time but only the awful stillness that comes in the wake of death; even then God's providential hand is over the situation and can redeem it.

I have a powerful video that I want to show you. But I have some preliminary comments. We, as Christians, do not seek out martyrdom; nor is every sin equal to every other—we are not Isis. But I think the video tries to make some theological sense out of the senseless and awful killing of Christians around the globe. And it speaks to our need to remain courageous and committed to love and peace in the midst of chaos.

God is wanting to get the attention of the whole world. He is chasing after everyone, wanting them to know that Love is Lord and Love is eternal and all powerful. And Love calls those trapped in fear and violence to let go of the need for revenge. Because God will sort that all of that out in the end.

I want to conclude by talking about I came to be aware of how Eternal Love was chasing after me. I was going through a life storm. At the time I was a self-relying rationalist who believed I could control myself and the circumstances of my life. Suddenly, there were incomprehensible things going on; things out of my control and I was responding not rationally but very poorly to things being out of my control.

And as I was reeling from this storm, I decided to cry out to God, even though I did not believe in him. And the peace and calm that immediately settled upon my soul and the Word that was quite clearly spoken was incomprehensible and amazing. I immediately wondered who or what could do such a thing. Faith had grabbed me and would never let me go.

You may not ever experience such a thing. But have you made it through a life storm, largely intact, grieving a loss perhaps but also stronger, more mature, more compassionate, more faithful? Will you learn to cry out to God not just in desperate circumstances but every day? Are you willing to follow the command of God to “Be still and know that I am God”? When we learn to remain calm when storms are threatening; and when we turn ourselves and our lives over to the sovereign power of God, we come to see and feel that God is...that God is love and power and thus God will save us and the whole world.

Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing! And God’s people say...