

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 12 Year B 2021

Without doubt, the past 18 months has been a tumultuous time. The heady days of last year now may seem something like a bad dream. But its effects certainly continue to be felt. And the past month has brought the ripples of that storm closer to us than we might hope. It's been a tumultuous, unstable time. So much has changed. So much of what we took for granted has been challenged. So much has become unsettled. It has been – and indeed in many parts of the globe remains – a stormy time.

It has been one of my firm convictions, based on a reading of the biblical narrative, and a reflection of the story of the church through its long, winding history, that we cannot, as people of faith, say that God is absent from this experience. As people of faith, we cannot approach this storm from a purely materialist, naturalistic understanding. One of the tasks of mature Christian faith is to learn to discern the hand and presence of God throughout our lives. And not simply to make this a personal/individual endeavor. The story God is crafting in our world is unfolding through all of us, through all peoples, indeed the entire cosmos. The task of the Christian is to recognize the hand of God at work in the world and to align our lives with it. It is our task to align our lives, our story, with his, and not simply ignore or push against it. Even in the difficult moments of life. Even in the moments of suffering and hardship, God's hand can be discerned. God can be found even in our storms.

The well-known gospel story placed before us today speaks to something of the storms we all experience. In the gospel imagination, however, the boat symbolizes the church and the stormy waters the world. The startling feature of this story is of the disciples, fearing for their lives, waking up Jesus who is inexplicably asleep! And not only is Jesus asleep, but his head is on a cushion! Through this scene of tumult – a blowing gale, of waves breaking onto the boat, of almost being swamped – there is the Lord Christ, his head serenely resting on a cushion. It could barely be more of a contrast, and that almost certainly intentional: the *serenity* of the resting Christ in contrast to the lashing storms. In our own lives, and even in the life of the church, there is much that could add to our stress and anxiety. Pick your issue. But the image of Christ serenely resting on a pillow should disarm some of our anxiety. Quite simply, the evangelist is telling us: *Christ is in the boat with us!* Even in apparent silence, or distance or even absence (which is a very real experience for many of us) Christ remains present, remains in the boat with us.

But Jesus roused from sleep and commanding the winds to cease and the seas be calm seeks to answer the most critical question the entire New Testament seeks to answer: *who is Jesus?* The gospel portion today tells us this is the *very* question the evangelist is seeking to answer, *who can this be?* With the answer coming: the one whom *even the wind and the sea obey him*. Jesus speaks and things happen. He speaks and the creation is ordered, or re-ordered. This is the evangelist Mark reminding us of what he told us at the very outset of his Gospel: Jesus is the presence and power of God himself! The gospel opens: *the beginning (the genesis) of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*. Reminding us that Jesus' presence was an act of new creation. Here, the same point. Jesus speaks – as in the account of creation – and that word is effective. The God who hovered over the primordial watery abyss is the same God in the boat in Galilee, who speaks and stills the waters. And in this we are meant to hear and notice an extraordinary and unsettling claim. The disciples, we are told, are filled with awe because Mark wants us to understand what is at stake. God – the creator God of Israel - *is present*. In this man Jesus Christ, God is present, active, at work amongst us. *This is the one who is the boat with us!*

And this *is* a truly shocking, unexpected thing. We are used glibly saying things like, *God is with us, we're never alone. God is on our side*. So, it is good then to rattle some of this complacency and look once more at the response of the disciples in the boat. Because they *are* rattled. And not ultimately, from the storm! They are struck with awe at Christ! And we can hear them thinking, *Who is this really in the boat with us?*

Christ present in the boat of the church amidst the storms of the world proposes an important theological truth, one that the evangelist Mark is keen for us to understand. And this is that God in Christ is *especially revealed* in situations of opposition or in circumstances that are deeply troubling. In other words, *God is most clearly seen in the storm*. Just think, Jesus is born, grows up and ministers in an incredibly volatile political and religious environment. He is surrounded by potential enemies. He is immersed in the midst of a humanity afflicted by illness, ignorance, and death. He is opposed by fallen spiritual powers. *This is the world through which Jesus makes his way*. God has entered his creation because things have gone terribly wrong, and it is this sorry state of affairs that helps us understand why it was necessary for God to intervene in such an extraordinary way. God in Christ has come to set right a world gone wrong. He comes for precisely that reason to calm the winds and still the waves.

Now, our approach to the human predicament, to all our storms and sufferings and hardships, is to attempt to *fix things* through our own self striving, adjusting our political or economic realities, reforming our religion, advancing standards of living. But all these attempts always have a mixed result. And our best efforts are easily undermined. The raw facts of being human, and the oftentimes perilous state of the world, are intractable. They never really are fixed. In other words: *we can't save ourselves*. So, when God reveals himself in Jesus, he doesn't go about seeking to 'fix' the world by using the very things that have brought us to such an impasse. How many efforts of the church have missed this essential point!

Instead, God confronts the very forces that drive the world and which work to unravel God's original purpose: sin, death and the devil. *These* are the realities that bring us time and time again to edge of destruction and despair, undermining even the best among us, provoking the fear that leads to all sorts of tyranny and enticing us with promises that ultimately prove empty and false. It is *these* stormy powers that God in Christ has come to expose and undermine, and in doing so signal their ultimate defeat.

Christ's confrontation with sin, death and the devil reaches its climax when God seemingly places himself in their clutches, when he succumbs to their power. But this just goes to show how deep the waters and how far out in boat he goes with us. And it is on the cross - the very sign of defeat - that the powers which sought to swallow Christ, are in fact undone. It is this stunning *reversal of our expectations* that should lead us even here, and even now, and even in our own lives, to be amazed, to allow *ourselves* to be awestruck. If we have never had that sense of awe and amazement by what God is doing in Christ, then we have not woken up to the extent of the human predicament and our part in it. In the face of this - in the face of the *extent* to which Christ comes to share in the troubles and difficulties of life - we should be moved, stirred, to consider the implications of this for ourselves.

In the storms that beset us - here, about us, in us - we find ourselves in the same place as the disciples. We find ourselves calling out to the one who has placed himself *right in the midst* of the howling winds & ferocious waves that are part of so much of human experience. The evangelist here is not simply giving us weather report. They are signs that we are part of fragile, fallen, and finite world. We long for the rescue that only comes from the One whom the wind and the seas obey. This One does not remain nameless and unknown to us. It is Jesus, the God of Israel, the one true God. Amen.