

Lectionary 12B 2018, June 24, 2018, Mark 4:35-41, Job 38:1-11, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, Pa., Kurt S. Strause

Should every storm in our lives be stilled? Hearing this morning's gospel might lead to that conclusion. Relating this story of Jesus calming the storm to the stormy periods in our own lives is only natural. Storms come in lots of different ways: the storms are family discord and strife, the gale of an unexpected life-threatening illness such as cancer or heart disease. Quite possibly the storm might include a precarious financial situation, a loss of employment, investments suddenly going south. How often do we end up praying in situations such as these, "Oh, Lord, calm the stormy waters of my life. Restore me to health, restore my job, restore my family?" We learn from the story to hope and pray for God's intervention, stilling the storms that rage around us and within us.

But is this really what our lesson this morning is teaching us? To pray to God for calm, to expect stillness instead of storm? I don't know why it never struck me quite like this before, but I'm not sure anymore if calm is always such a good thing. Let's consider the whole story.

Jesus invites the disciples to travel by boat to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Up to this point Jesus is attracting big crowds. He is enjoying great success. But Jesus isn't satisfied to rest on success. Rather, he invites the disciples to travel into uncharted territory, to the other side of the sea, to the land of the Gentiles. For the disciples this journey involves great risk. Jews and Gentiles just don't mix. Clearly, Jesus has a reason to leave the success of his work on one side and go to the riskier work of ministering among the Gentiles.

Along the way the storm rises, and the disciples, most of whom are experienced fishermen, start to panic. "Do you not care we are perishing?" they cry out to the sleeping Jesus. When Jesus wakes up, rebukes the winds and the waves and there is, as Mark describes it, a "dead calm."

Now I don't know if you have ever been sailing before in a boat that doesn't have an auxiliary motor, but a dead calm is deadly for a sailboat. The sea of Galilee is no mere pond; it's about six miles across and from east to west and 12 miles across from north to south. If you are stuck in the middle of a dead calm sea in a sailboat there are only two options. You sit and wait for some wind, going nowhere, or you begin the long hard work of rowing to shore.

So, I will ask the question a bit differently. Which is better, running along at breakneck speed in a storm towards your destination or sitting still in a dead calm? Here's another question: Can there be times when we should refrain from praying for calm and the stilling of storms in our lives?

I would like to allow that question to just hang here in the air for just a few moments. I'm not sure there are any quick and easy answers to it. While we think about that question I want you to consider the character of Job.

Our first reading is just a snippet of God's response to Job. If you aren't familiar with Job let me fill in for you at least the outline of the story.

Job is a wealthy and righteous God-fearing man. To test whether or not Job will remain God-fearing God removes everything dear to Job; his wealth, his family, his health, and his standing within the community. His friends follow the conventional wisdom of the day telling him that the cause for his misfortune must be due to some terrible sin in his life, and that God must be cursing him for his sin. The only way out is to agree with God, that confess his great sin. Job steadfastly refuses to cave in to this belief, maintaining his innocence against God. In a

stirring defense Job says to God, "if I have sinned, then I deserve to be cut off from the land, but since I have not sinned, I am innocent."

God's answer to Job is something of a non-answer. God turns around and questions Job. "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth, when the seas were shut in with doors?" God never answers Job directly. But God also does not acknowledge that what Job's friends tell him is true; namely that suffering is the result of sin. In fact, the whole book of Job simply acknowledges suffering as a fact of life. Suffering doesn't serve some grand moral purpose. Suffering doesn't necessarily teach us some profound lesson about character or patience. Maybe there are times when it will, but maybe it won't. Ultimately these things are left to remain in the grand arena of mystery.

But we must remember that God, while not answering Job's questions directly, does indeed answer. It may not be the answer Job wanted, or even expected. But in the non-answer of God a certain amount of hope is to be found. At various times in life it may seem that God is silent or absent. Maybe worse, God is punishing us. But the story of Job tells us that God's majestic sweep of the universe is to help us keep things in perspective, even when we would rather wish for God's micromanaging our own affairs a bit more closely.

Which brings me back to those storms of life. Job experienced a category 5 hurricane of failing health, failing wealth, family destruction. Sometimes these storms blow into our lives as well. Maybe not in the same form, but nevertheless still stormy enough for us to sometimes cry out to God, "Stop!" Are we not also like those disciples who plead with a sleeping Jesus, "do you not care?" And isn't that how it seems at times, that God, by his silence, by his sleeping while we are floundering, doesn't seem to care about our misfortunes?

But I would like us to consider Jesus calming the storm in a slightly different way than we are used to thinking about it. We think of Jesus stilling the storm as a loving response to their terror and fear. But when he calms the storm Jesus actually ends up rebuking them for their lack of faith. Jesus remained asleep during the storm. The disciples see this as a lack of concern on Jesus' part. But could not his sleeping be seen rather as a surplus of confidence on his part that this storm, although seemingly fierce, was nothing to be frightened about? And when they prayed for help, how did Jesus give them help? By stilling the storm, which brought their journey to a dead stop and now meant they were on their own as far as getting anywhere. They now had to pull out the oars and start rowing the several miles across the sea.

I don't want to fall into the trap of Job's friends and say that every storm in life is the result of sin. I don't even want to say that every storm is supposed to teach us some great moral lesson. But I would like to suggest that the image of a sleeping Jesus in our boat, while we are tossed about on the sea, is not always to be interpreted as God's silence or that God doesn't care. God's silence may in fact be the same kind of non-answer given to Job. Not answering directly, but nonetheless helping us the larger picture, when all that we can see is the storm raging around us.

I believe these stories tell us that not every storm needs to be stilled. For it may mean that we stop moving and stop growing in our understanding of God and our place in the world. Storms are risky, no question about it. Life itself is risky. But isn't that what we as Christians are called to be in the world? Aren't we called to take risks on behalf of our neighbor, on behalf of the world? After all, isn't that what Jesus did also, took an enormous risk for us? I suppose Jesus could have called out, when he found himself in the midst of the storm, on that night before his betrayal, called out for calm and peace. But thank God that storm was allowed to rage on for a while. Through the storm of the cross Jesus made it home. And so shall we. Amen.

Prayers, June 24, 2018

For the church, for the world, for all in need of healing and grace, let us lift our prayers to God.

For the one, holy church of Christ, called into faith and service through Holy Baptism, that we might be drawn into greater unity around the cross and proclaim your grace throughout the world. Bless those who share faith and mission, especially our brothers and sisters of Mbalizi Lutheran Church, missionaries Jodi and Stephen Swanson, our bishops Elizabeth and James, all pastors, deacons, and all the baptized people of God with devotion and zeal to give witness to your love. Lord, in your mercy....

For those who suffer the storms of life; that they may be comforted and strengthened during times of trial. For those who struggle with poverty or disease, against war and violence; for those who flee from their homes seeking safety and shelter in foreign lands, for those separated from loved ones, and those who mourn; that they may receive assistance and shelter and hope. Lord, in your mercy...

For those who lead our communities, our nation, and nations throughout the world. Grant them wisdom to lead with justice and compassion, inspired and informed by your will that all people deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. Lord, in your mercy....

For all who face trials, temptations and crushing loads of despair and grief. For the dying, for those who give care in hospitals, nursing homes and hospice centers. For all who are sick and especially those we name to you in prayer, especially.... Lord, in your mercy...

For all faithful disciples who followed you in life and now rest in you we give you thanks gracious Lord. May their witness continue to inspire us to greater faith and devotion until that day when we shall be reunited around your throne of glory. Lord, in your mercy...