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Eye of the Storm

Dr. Jo Forrest

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In ancient Hebrew thought, water represents so much more than a physical reality. It is the first element God creates. It is the source of life: trees take root and grow beside streams, birds find shelter and soar, fish of the sea multiply, and it is essential to humankind.

On the flip side, quickly our faith ancestors become humble before water's power to destroy.

Whether filling unfathomable depths of the sea, relentlessly rushing in full flood, evaporating in a death-dealing drought, or wiping away in an all-consuming deluge, water takes on a metaphysical quality.

Our inability to harness it incites fear among the ancient readers and persists today.

Scripture preserves story after story of God's singular ability to subdue and control water in all its forms. After the flood, God makes a covenant with Noah. God parts the seas for the Israelite escape into freedom. God wrings water from the skies to rain on parched fields. The Book of Job describes God trampling on the waves and walking in the recesses of the deep. God alone reigns over water.

Early in Jesus' ministry, the Gospel of Matthew tells of the time Jesus gets into a boat and his disciples follow. He settles into the bow and promptly falls asleep. He remains un-fussed as the waves begin to swamp them.

His disciples, many of them fishermen, who sense the danger, shake him awake with “save us, we are perishing.” The bleary-eyed Jesus questions, “why are you afraid, you of little faith.” He speaks to the wind and creates a dead calm across the water.

They question “who is this who controls the seas?”

Much later in the gospel, after the miraculous healing of sickness and hunger, the disciples get closer to the truth of his identity. Today’s story follows immediately on the heels of the feeding of the 5,000.

Dear God,

We understand being frightened. We understand what it’s like to question Jesus and your presence as we face the storms of life. May we listen to this story and learn to trust. Amen.

Matthew 14:22-33

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray.

When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them.

And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear.

But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Jesus said, "Come." So, Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.

But when Peter noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Fear dominates this story. The disciples are afraid of being separated from Jesus. Then the sea starts to crash overboard.

They struggle to keep afloat. Not until the fourth watch of the night, sometime between 3 and 6 am, while still dark, Jesus comes to them.

By this time, they've battled waves, one after another, for so long they feel saturated. Even they could author the idea that evil rises from the sea.

Once present, fear infects everyone so much so that when Jesus approaches the disciples, by walking on water, and even though they need him, his image terrifies them.

Who can blame them for mistaking him for death? These fishermen know how easily boats capsize and currents pull someone into a watery grave. Matthew tells us, “They cried out in fear.”

Jesus says, “It is I.”

Any Hebrew listener to this story remembers the story of Moses standing before a burning bush, consumed with fear. Moses asks God for a name and receives the simple and confounding name translated as – “I am.” “I am who I am.” “I will be who I will be.” And also “It is I.”

By walking on water and saying this unmistakable name, Jesus exercises a prerogative that belongs to God alone.

Jesus’ “it is I” becomes real when he masters the storms and comes to people in times of trouble.

Peter gets it. He realizes that faith in Jesus draws him closer to the source of all life – God. Focusing on Jesus dispels his fear.

This fisherman sets aside his life-long wisdom of what happens when you step out of the boat and risks saying, “command me to come to you.”

Jesus complies, saying “Come.” Peter walks on water too.

For a brief moment, Peter grasps what it is like to trust Jesus with his life.

Then the waves pound Peter, his faith fades, and he starts to sink.

Even the most passionate servants can become overwhelmed when facing danger. Even though Peter believes, fear is so potent. It is so hard to hold on to faith in the midst of a storm.

Some will look at Peter’s escapade and conclude that if your faith is strong enough, no harm will befall you. Never give in to fear or doubt.

That sets the bar so high for faith that we can become afraid to even try to hold on to it. We know all too well the doubts we harbor. How’s that for dissolving in a circle of fear that only fuels more fear, or worse, despair?

When bad things happen, and they will, some people will speak as though they believe that a lack of faith caused whatever accident, illness, or tragedy. Or that God isn’t compassionate enough to protect us. Or that God is not a loving God, seeking to punish us for some perceived sin.

When we are afraid, or angry, or don’t understand how something tragic could happen, we want to assign blame. We live in cause and effect. Someone must be responsible.

This brings me to something I call one of those *little Christian lies*: “it is God’s will.” Perhaps you have heard this or been hurt by it.

The late William Sloan Coffin preached a sermon at The Riverside Church in New York just two weeks after his 20-year-old son died in a car accident. Coffin tells the story of a woman who brought food and then says to him: “I just don’t understand, but it was the will of God.”

Instantly I was up and in hot pursuit, swarming all over her. “I’ll say you don’t lady.” I said ...”Do you think it was the will of God that Alex never fixed that lousy windshield wiper of his, that he was probably driving too fast in such a storm, that he probably had had a couple of ‘frosties’ too many? Do you think it is God’s will that there are no streetlights along that stretch of road?”

For some reason, nothing so infuriates me as the incapacity of seemingly intelligent people to get it through their heads that God does not go around this world with his finger on triggers, his fist around knives, his hands on steering wheels ... The one thing that should never be said when someone dies is, “It is the will of God.” Never do we know enough to say that.

Coffin continues ...” My own consolation lies in knowing that it was *not* the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God’s heart was the first of all our hearts to break.¹

In her defense, I’ve heard this so many times, cringing a bit more each time. People offer such platitudes when all we want is sure footing or cannot muster the courage to be fully present with another’s pain, grief, or turbulent circumstance.

We cannot wash away anyone’s pain. Nor should we try to make ourselves feel safer with this little lie.

God does not cause pain and suffering. It is never God’s will that we cower in fear or endure storms alone. When Peter’s fear overtook him and he began to sink the text says “immediately” Jesus reached for him.

Jesus does not tally Peter’s faith practices or shortfalls.

Immediately, Jesus saves. Jesus saves all of Peter, the doubting as well as the faithful parts. It is not God’s will for us experience evil: t is God’s will to be fully present with us.

The original, Greek text is so sparse. There are no punctuation marks, paragraphs, or chapters. No breath marks, let alone “tone-of-voice” marks. When they got back in the boat some readers hear Jesus sternly reprimand Peter with hands-on-hips “why did you doubt?” Instead, perhaps he took Peter’s chin-in-hand with the

¹ William Sloan Coffin, “Alex’s Death, in *The Collected Sermons of William Sloan Coffin: The Riverside Years*, vol. 2 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008) 3-4.

tenderness of a proud parent “you of little faith, why did you doubt? I knew you could do it. You knew I would be there for you”.

I certainly will not edit scripture, but as the spirit moves in me, I'd like to think that there were a few 'atta-boys' thrown around in that boat, celebrating with fist bumps.

Fear turns us away from God, takes us from trusting in what God has done and can do, limiting what we can and are willing to do.

Jesus comes in the midst of a storm. Peter never forgets this. Peter stands in for all of us who waiver between fear and faith. Fear could have locked him locked on shore or secured in the boat.

The miracle of Jesus walking on water reveals God will go to any length to meet us. When they are all back in the boat this is the first time the disciples claim Jesus is “truly the Son of God.”

That was the whole purpose of the incarnation of Jesus; we learn the length to which God will be present when we encounter evil. Then, as followers of the risen Christ, we can pay forward his grace.

After all the floods of the early summer, extreme droughts letting wildfires burn paradise, and ocean temperatures rise, how long can we deny the impact of our collective lifestyles, the evil we inflict upon nature? We can trust Jesus' presence to overcome any fear of speaking out to protect God's good earth and not cower if fear of placing the word “climate” in a sentence that also contains the word “change.”

Jesus takes our hand as we stand up for the Damion Picketts of the world, a man just doing his job but tormented for the color of his skin. We can attack the evils of racism.

We pay the grace forward by placing our faith in that which is bigger than us and being with others when storms or evil occurs.

Lenora Tubbs Tinsdale wrote in an essay about her experience with breast cancer: “some days in my fight for wholeness ... I confess that the lions and tigers and bears threaten to overwhelm me.” She continues with how sick and tired she was of being sick and tired and yet she was scheduled for another treatment.

My nurse – incredibly compassionate and kind – was a bit taken aback, since ordinarily my disposition in the treatment room is sunny...there was too much... terror to be encountered...

She brought me a box of tissues, began the IV...laid an afghan over my lap to warm me when the IV fluids made me cold, pulled the lever at the side of my chair so that my feet would be comfortably propped up ...

As I lay there, I thought of the email I had received just the day before from my ... daughter. “You’re tough, you know, Momma.” She had written to me, “tough even if you don’t feel like it.”

Yesterday I felt less than tough. I felt like a coward who needed a new heart, like a tin man who lacked a soul, and like Dorothy who had been slung far from home and set on a tortuous journey with no end in sight. I felt broken, beaten down, and afraid.

“Tough” is not usually how I feel these days. Yet at some tender place, deep down within my fearful heart, I wondered if I could believe in her vision of me ... And perhaps lions and tigers and bears are not so threatening after all. For once again, I have been surrounded and upheld by a prior and more powerful grace.”²

God does not will suffering. God wills life. In Jesus, God comes to be with us, no matter the storms we face.

Please pray with me ...

God there are so many evils in this world that threaten us .., some on a grand scale others deeply personal. We offer to you now our prayers for faith in you as we face them ...

² Lenora Tubbs Tinsdale, *The Sun Still Rises: Mediations on Faith at Midlife* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox 2017), 68.



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2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630
www.westminster-church.org