



The Westminster Pulpit

Sermons Preached at Westminster Presbyterian Church

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When Life Tumbles In

“But [Jesus] was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, ‘Teacher, do you not care...?’” (Mark 4:38)

Job 38:1-11; Psalm 133; **Mark 4:35-41**

Rev. Guy D. Griffith

June 20, 2021 // Fourth Sunday after Pentecost // Father’s Day

Introduction:

Our text from Mark this morning is part of a carefully designed section of the Gospel that begins at 4:1 with the well-known Parable of the Sower. After teaching that parable, Jesus draws his disciples aside and explains it to them line by line. He then tells a set of four more parables:

- the Parable of the Lamp under a Bushel (4:21-23),
- the parable of the Measure (4:24-25),
- the parable of the Growing Seed (4:26-29), and
- the parable of the Mustard Seed (4:30-32).

After these parables are finished Mark assures his readers that Jesus always explains everything to his disciples, setting us up to expect another line-by-line lesson (4:33-34). Instead, there is a set of four stories describing four works of power. It seems clear that Mark intends us to hear these four events as the promised explanation for the four preceding parables. The first of the four great works of power – the stilling of the storm – is our passage this morning. *Hear the Word of God!*

35 On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” 36 And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the

boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. 37 A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. 38 But 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?" 39 He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. 40 He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" 41 And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" *The Word of the Lord.*

SERMON:

Asleep during the storm? Really? I don't know about you, but that's hard for me to believe. I mean, have you ever been in a storm...on a boat...out on the water? Now I don't mean a boat like the Queen Mary or some Norwegian Cruise liner that holds a couple of thousand passengers. No, I'm talking of something more like the S.S. Minnow – something that will hold a dozen or so. Ever been out at sea in something like that? No one's sleeping!¹

It was a beautiful Monday in August in the mid-1990's. I was serving a church in the northern Chicago suburbs just west of Lake Forest. My Clerk of Session was an avid sailor who owned a sailboat with another guy at the marina in downtown Chicago just by the Adler Planetarium. "We're sailing across to Michigan tomorrow, want to come?" he asked between services on Sunday. "Would I?!! There's nothing I'd like more." So a plan was made. I'd take the train down, meet them at the boat, sail across and then take the train back while they sailed up the Michigan coast. What could be more fun? What possibly could go wrong? Well, maybe the fact that the sermon that morning was from the book of Jonah should have been a warning!

When I arrived at the marina, I was impressed. The boat was a 25footer and looked big. In addition to my friend, the co-owner and his two teenagers were already there. The day was hot and sunny without a cloud in the sky. We made a good start of it and were about half-way across. The Sears Tower was just visible on the horizon when I saw a black cloud coming from the southwest. It came across the water quickly bringing rain, so we dropped the sails and let it pass. The rain was...refreshing. "Glad that's over!" I thought as I hoisted up the sails. Well, about 20 minutes later the storm turned around over the lake and hammered us. All of a sudden we encountered zero visibility, 50 knot winds, and 15 foot waves. That boat was small. My friend and I tied-on while we sent his friend and his children below so we could batten down the hatches. For two hours we were battered and tossed and struck once by lightning. My friend fought at the tiller, and I looked out for any rogue waves. Finally, just as we were about to hail the Coast Guard we saw through the storm the stacks of Gary and limped into Michigan City, Indiana, grateful to be back on *terra firma*. I'll tell you this much: no one was sleeping on that boat!

¹ After the service two members spoke to me. The first, Jim Hunt, said he was serving as a naval officer on a destroyer in a storm and while awake, he was being sick as a dog. The other, Dr. Jed Kuhn told me that during his medical residency he would have been able to sleep during the storm.

I wish I would have read what I did later about Lake Michigan before I set out to sail that morning:

Squalls tend to be common and can present a challenge to smaller boats. The wind pattern and velocity on Lake Michigan can also get quite high which can lead to big waves. The changeability of the conditions means a storm can quickly roll in before calming just a few hours later. Summer thunderstorms can be particularly dangerous and are difficult to predict.² ***You don't say!!***

Although Lake Michigan is much larger, that sounds exactly like a description of what happens on the Sea of Galilee. And in the midst of the storm, the Disciples call out in fear, "Jesus, do you not care that we are perishing?" Hear it? "Don't you care?"

It's like the cartoon I saw the other day that was entitled Existential Dilemma Post-Pandemic Edition. It pictured a man looking like Moses standing on a mountaintop Gazing up into a shaft of light coming down from a cloud. The caption reads, "Hello? Hello? I think you're on mute?"³

When life tumbles in, we wonder, "Is God on mute?" "Teacher, do you not care?"

Does God care? When the storms of life blow fierce, when life tumbles in, sleep comes hard. This summer we're studying Tish Harrison Warren's book, *Prayer in the Night: For Those Who Work, or Watch, or Weep*, which is a wonderful extended meditation on the prayer of Compline, the traditional liturgical last prayer of the day. She writes out of the grief of her father's sudden death and the loss of two pregnancies,

My life's adversity has been no more than the usual. My experiences of loss and sorrow are ordinary....Yet knowing these experiences are common doesn't lessen the pain of walking through them ourselves....And yet grief is always there, lying silently in the corner of every room like some decrepit family pet.⁴

She goes on to speak the deep truth that Donovan, Heidi, and I know all too well:

As a priest, I see this every week. The amount of pain shouldered by even the seemingly happiest among us is enough to leave me reeling. I stand before the people of my church, and I know their stories. Here is a gorgeous woman who seems to have it all together. Her beloved son is an addict, and she lives with the knowledge that her love is not enough to rescue him. Here is a man whose family seems perfect. He still reels from the pain of a father he could never please. Here

² <https://improvesailing.com/destinations/11-sailor-tips-for-sailing-lake-michigan-with-distances>

³ From Carols Wilton's Facebook page: see last page.

⁴Tish Harrison Warren, *Prayer in the Night: For Those Who Work or Watch or Weep*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2021), p. 39-41.

is a woman with an enviable career. She longs to have a child and has stopped counting how many miscarriages she's had. My congregation is beautiful and ordinary, but in that one room each Sunday there's enough sadness to make the heaven's silent.⁵

I look out on you. I don't know all your stories, but have been here long enough to know many of them and the heartbreak that comes. And maybe for you, like me, a holiday like Father's Day, brings some of that up to the surface. For some, this is the first Father's Day without dad, while for others among us it might be our last. And a text like ours today makes you remember the storms you have had to endure. As one commentator notes:

When chaos threatens our lives and we are rendered helpless in its grip, fear and anxiety seize us. A people of faith we cry out to the Jesus who promises to accompany us. Our cry sometime reveals more about our fear than our faith. "Do you not care?" we shout. Jesus responds by asking us to choose faith not fear.⁶

I know of nothing more needed by all of us in times when things come apart, when life tumbles in, when the blest tie that binds is severed, especially in those times when parents die, when they are "way out beyond us, / in a field we cannot reach."⁷

Now there is more than one way to speak of death. We may speak of death in general and in the abstract, for it often meets us just in this way...when we hear of the death of someone we do not know; then we discuss that inevitable fact of life in a classroom or read about it in the newspaper or see it on the silver screen.

When we deal with death in general, we have the luxury of objectivity. We can pick it up for a time, then, when dinner is ready, we can put it down, postponing any decision concerning death's meaning for life.

It is not death in general, but death in particular that often pushes life against the wall and shakes the foundation of our souls. It is when death strikes home that we need to know God cares.

Earlier this week I had a call from an old boyhood buddy, named Scott. His dad, known to everyone in my hometown as Mr. D. or Big Tom, was in hospice with an aggressive form of liver cancer. The time was growing short and Scott wanted to talk about it. Mr. D. was 95 and the only other time he'd been in the hospital prior to this was when he was born. He had been our high school Spanish teacher as was as genial and encouraging as any teacher in the school. But

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 40.

⁶ M. Jan Holton, *Feasting on the Gospels: Mark a Feasting on the Word Commentary*, Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson, Editors, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), p. 140.

⁷ Joyce Sutphen, "My Father, Dying" from *Carrying Water to the Field: New and Selected Poems* (University of Nebraska Press, 2019). I put this poem in its entirety on the front of the bulletin and reprinted it at the end.

what I remember most about him happened just after the school bell rang every day. If you looked outside the front door of school to the curb you'd see a green Chevy Nova waiting with the engine running driven by one of Scott's older brothers. They were waiting to drive Mr. D. across town to work the second shift at The Steel⁸, from 3:00-11:00pm. For 35 years every day he taught school and then donned a hard hat and headed to the steel mill, never complaining, doing it joyfully, looking to make life better for his family.

"You know the last thing he said to me, Griff?" Scott asked. "Brakes."

"Brakes?" You gotta be kidding me.

"No, I told him my niece had come up and we were selling his car to her, and he motioned me close and whispered 'Brakes.' Turns out he was worried that the car needed new brakes. There he is, dying of liver cancer, wracked with pain, and he's still thinking about other people. It sums up his whole life. I told him that I was sorry I never had him as a teacher in high school but I'm forever grateful to have had him teaching me how to live life for 61 years."⁹

One interesting thing to note about our passage is that the disciples are in a boat. For the early church the boat stood for the church. The word "nave" meaning the central part of the church building where you are sitting, comes from the same root as navy. In early Christian art the symbol of the church is always a sailboat, not a rowboat, because it is driven by the spirit in the shadow of the cross. And it is in the boat, during a storm, that the Disciples glimpse his power and glory. As the old gospel song sings, "What manner of man is that that walked upon the water and calmed the ragin' sea? What manner of man is this that gave his life for me?"¹⁰ Perhaps the central question isn't "Teacher, do you not care?" but whether we'll get into the boat with him in the first place.

We need to remember, too, that in Psalm 3 the psalmist says that the Messiah can lie down and sleep even amid his enemies because God is his shield, his glory, and his sustenance. Similarly, Jesus is able to sleep here in the midst of the storm not out of a lack of care or concern for the safety of the Disciples, but because of his abiding relationship with His Father through the Spirit.

This past Thursday when we were working through Warren's book, *Prayer in the Night*, I found myself thinking of my Dad. Deeply grateful, deeply grateful for a gift he gave me. He never gave me any money, not trust funds, no antiques at home. But Pop gave me faith. I

⁸ "The Steel" is what Bethlehem Steel Corporation was known throughout the Lehigh Valley. During the 20th Century it was one of the largest steel producing and shipbuilding companies in the world.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bethlehem_Steel

⁹ Private conversation with my friend, Scott DeCrosta.

¹⁰ "What Manner of Man is This?" (https://video.search.yahoo.com/yhs/search?fr=yhs-fc-1&ei=UTF-8&hsimp=yhs-1&hspart=fc¶m1=7¶m2=eJw1i0EOgyAQRa8yS03MyCiixqMYF1QpElCMAgX7%2BmKarv6b9zLaTH03hDcxVpai6bNhhjTfVzY13ijPGKXgEs92twllqpBqpvaVWPtozRDxlpMV%2FjHMMyr5BBcpl18leA9QBiyDqlQvAOXoKnllFnqUs9rDnyqqyxFJDY%2BVhcBs5YBVqN1qczwzrtfVN4SMuS8LpCIQ5BPuZv%2Fm5r0rzeCY8W%2Ffoxk%2Bgw%3D%3D&p=what+manner+of+man+is+this+mahalia+jackson&type=fc_AC3A35592DF_s69_g_e_d_n1788_c24#id=1&vid=e510c18857e56eadb959a042730ac32b&action=click) retrieved 6/23/21.

remember he was never a “pillar of the congregation.” He was never an Elder or Deacon. But the church tried to find a place for him to serve and knew he’d been active in community theatre, so asked him to produce plays. I can remember a time – it must have been during Lent when I was 9 or 10 and I was with Pop when he was getting ready for play rehearsal on a Sunday afternoon. We were in the cavernous Fellowship Hall, only the two of us, and he was having me help with a music cue. At one point he wanted a recording of the hymn, “Where You There When They Crucified My Lord” played. It was from a record, and I remember him playing it and then stopping it...lifting up the needle...and asking me if I knew what the hymn meant? Did I understand? And then he explained it and talked to me through God’s grace. I am so grateful that he did that.

That thought made me recall an even earlier memory, one that came with a word. I remember driving in the car and asking the question, “Dad, what does solace mean?” Where did that come from? Solace is a big word for a little kid. You know where solace come from, don’t you? From the last line of the old hymn which we would have been singing, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.”

Are we weak and heavy-laden,
Cumbered with a load of care?
Precious Savior, still our refuge—
In His arms He’ll take and shield thee,
Thou wilt find a *solace* there.¹¹

“Pop, what’s a solace?” God cares. Pop taught me that when life tumbles in, when the storms beat heavy, God may seem to be sleeping, but can say “Peace, be still.” So we sing:

Have we trials and temptations?
Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged,
Take it to the Lord in prayer.
Can we find a friend so faithful
Who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness,
Take it to the Lord in prayer.¹²

Thanks be to God!

The Lord be with you: Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep this [day], and give your angels charge over those who sleep. Tend the sick, Lord Christ; give rest to

¹¹ “What a Friend We Have In Jesus” in *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), #465.

¹² *Ibid.*, #465.

the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous, and all for
your love's sake.
Amen.

My Father, Dying

by Joyce Sutphen

It was hard work, dying, harder
than anything he'd ever done.

Whatever brutal, bruising, back-
Breaking chore he'd forced himself

to endure—it was nothing
compared to this. And it took

so long. When would the job
be over? Who would call him

home for supper? And it was
hard for us (his children)—

all of our lives we'd heard
my mother telling us to go out,

help your father, but this
was work we could not do.

He was way out beyond us,
in a field we could not reach.

Joyce Sutphen, "My Father, Dying" from *Carrying Water to the Field: New and Selected Poems*.
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"Hello? Hello? I think you're on mute?"