***TWO QUESTIONS***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

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Texts: Psalm 107:1, 23-32 and Mark 4:35-41

 This story of Jesus calming the storm is perhaps one of the most familiar to our Christian ears. It is a story told in Sunday School classes beginning with our youngest kids, a story included in every Children’s Bible alongside Noah and the Ark, and Zacchaeus in the sycamore tree; it is a story full of excitement with the raging storm, Jesus’ ringing words to the wind and waves: “Peace, be still!”, and a happy ending – no one is swallowed by a whale or drowns or is otherwise smitten! It is a story with which children and adults can relate, even those who are not sailors. It is a story framed by two questions: one posed by the disciples and one posed by Jesus. Did you take note of those questions as I read the story moments ago, or were you too caught up with the wind and the waves and the miracle?

 The first question is posed by the disciples to Jesus while they are at sea. They are on the water because Jesus has suggested that they cross “to the other side,” and to get to the other side, they either have to go around the Sea of Galilee or across it. What would have been known to them, but less so to us today, is that “the other side” was Gentile territory. Mark places this miracle early in Jesus’ ministry, so as Mark records it, Jesus was extending his message beyond the bounds of Judaism from early on. “The other side” was both a literal and a figurative place to go, and the disciples might well have wondered why they would want to go there in the first place, but without complaint they climb into their boat, hoist Jesus aboard, and set out on the sea – with a handful of boats following them.

 Are you as willing to go “to the other side” as were Jesus and his disciples? Are you willing to leave your comfort zone of what is familiar and safe to venture out where Jesus sends you – to go to the other side? John Williams and James Harris, two Scottish missionaries, were willing to go to the other side of the world. They set sail in 1839 for the South Pacific island of Vanuatu to carry the message of Christ to the natives there. Upon their arrival they were promptly killed and eaten – not the most successful of missionary experiences. Yet remarkably two other missionaries agreed to take their place and set sail from Scotland to Vanuatu to try again to carry the gospel to the natives. Upon their arrival they were not killed and eaten; after several years, they finally had their first convert. Why did they survive when the first missionaries did not? In that day food was preserved by salting it; after the five-month sea voyage with a diet of salted food, the first missionaries were too salty to the taste of the cannibalistic natives; assuming that salty is what white people taste like, the natives had no interest in eating the next set of white strangers who arrived. You might say they found them distasteful!

 Would you go to Vanuatu or to the Gentiles on the other side of the Sea of Galilee or to the proverbial “other side of the tracks” or to any other “other side” to which God might send you? Would you go to the nursery here if that is where you were needed, or help out with children at Helping Hands, or serve meals at Trinity Soup kitchen, because for some of you that too is on “the other side” of the sea of your comfort zone? Following Christ sometimes means moving out of your comfortable space – geographically, personally, theologically, or politically – in order to be faithful. Would you, could you, can you do that or is moving from your comfort zone simply asking too much of you?

 The disciples weren’t facing cannibals or crying babies on the other side of the lake, but they were sailing to meet strangers whose ways and religion were not their own. For some of those disciples who were fishermen, the sea was more familiar and comfortable territory than what awaited them on the other side. That quickly changed. A great storm suddenly arose, as they do from time to time on that sea, and the boat was in danger of being swamped. The disciples were scrambling to stay afloat amid the tempest, and as the storm raged on, they became increasingly desperate. Amid all the stormy chaos, Jesus was fast asleep on a cushion in the stern of the boat. How he could sleep through such a storm is hard to imagine, but that is what Mark tells us. Jesus slept. And it was then, at the height of the storm, that the disciples woke him and posed the first question which frames this passage: “Do you not care that we are perishing?”

 I suspect that same question is being raised this day by Palestinians in Gaza and by Ukrainians in their bomb-shattered neighborhoods and by countless people in Sudan, by poor folks in our nation with nowhere to escape the heat this weekend and by migrants trying to escape the brutality of violent gangs, cartels, or their own governments in nations south of ours. How many times did that cry rise to God during the COVID pandemic and how often now upon receipt of some dire diagnosis: “Lord, do you not care that we are perishing?”

 It is not a hypothetical question. It is an accusation or perhaps a plea in the face of desperate straits. Does God care that people are suffering and perishing and struggling to survive day to day, or has God given up on us? It would be hard to blame God for rebooting the whole human experiment and moving on, given the extent to which the existential threats and suffering we face are so much attributable to human sinfulness – to greed for wealth or power, a penchant for violence, indifference to the poor among us, hateful rhetoric and rebellion against all that God tells us is good and just and right. Not all suffering is attributable to such sin, but much of it is. And for those who are victims of such sin and those who are suffering through no fault of their own and anyone else suffering for that matter, the question remains: *Lord, do you not care that we are perishing?*

 The testimony of the psalmist and Jesus, the Gospel writers and Paul, saints across the ages and saints within these walls is that God does indeed care, does indeed love us with a love that will not let us go. You heard it in the Psalm we read this morning as those rescued from storms at sea give thanks to God:

*They cried to the LORD in their trouble, and the LORD brought them out from their distress; the Lord made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed. Then they were glad because they had quiet, and the LORD brought them to their desired haven*.

You hear it from Jesus:

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that all who believe in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

You hear it from Paul:

*For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

You hear it from country singer Kirk Talley, singing:

*I’ve got a bad, bad problem, but a big, big God.*

I heard it from my mom who upon being diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor told us: *Whether I live or whether I die, I will be okay*.

You hear it boldly declared by writer Carol Kent in her book, *When I Lay My Isaac Down: Unshakable Faith in Unthinkable Circumstances*, when she writes:

*“Michael Yaconelli said it well:*

*(God) loves us when we don’t want him to love us. He loves us when we don’t act like Christians. He loves us when our lives are a mess. His love is sticky, resistant to rejection, aggressive, and persistent. The challenge is on, so go ahead, resist his love, run from it, hide from it. Go ahead and try. (Michael Yaconelli, Messy Spirituality, Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2002, p.124)*

*But you’ll lose. So instead, I encourage you to run to Him when you are beaten down, broken into pieces questioning your faith, and doubting His goodness. If you listen, you will hear Him say the same thing I said to my son on my first visit to the jail: ‘There is nothing that will ever take away my unconditional love for you.’ Get used to it. God loves people who don’t have all the answers.”[[1]](#endnote-1)*

And you heard it in Mark’s account of that storm on the Sea of Galilee:

*Jesus rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a great calm.*

 God does care, never abandons us, loves us and perseveres with us through thick and thin. God cares passionately that we are perishing, and it is for that very reason that God sent Jesus into the world: to save us and to offer us assurance of God’s love and hope with which to persevere and peace with which to ride out any storm. That is the good news we hold for ourselves, and it is the good news we bear to a world that seems battered by storms, both literal and figurative. To all those caught in such storms, we boldly declare: God cares! God saves! Do not be afraid! The Lord is with you!

 Were that the end of the story, with Jesus calming the storm, and the disciples safely making it to shore, then we would all have the happy ending we want. But there remains that second question which is one unsettling question in two parts which Jesus poses to the disciples: *Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?* It is the question posed to us who have heard the testimony of so many witnesses and experienced God’s blessing in our lives. It is the question with which we wrestle every time another storm hits and the fear wells up inside us. It is a question that is answered, not just with your lips but with your life, not just within these walls but outside these walls and especially when you are journeying to “the other side” away from your comfort zone.

 *Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?* Or do you have faith that makes you less fearful, less anxious, less hesitant to go where God asks you to go and do what God asks you to do – faith that makes you ready to respond to that final question posed by the awestruck disciples: *Who is this that even the wind and the sea obey him?* He is Jesus Christ, the savior of the world, the one who says to the wind and the waves and to us in the storm: Peace! Be still! Believe! Amen

1. Carol Kent, *When I Lay My Isaac Down: Unshakable Faith in Unthinkable Circumstances*, NavPress: Colorado Springs, 2004, pp.185-186 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)