

DOUBT IN FAITH

Job 38:8-11; 16-18

Mark 4:35-41

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Babcock Presbyterian Church

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The Old Testament reading comes from the Book of Job telling the story of a righteous man who faced one calamity after another yet still refused to curse God.

Job's neighbors attempted to explain his suffering away with pious religious platitudes saying among other things that his suffering was God's just punishment for his sins. But Job refused to believe that. Even so Job is left perplexed. Why would God let these terrible things happen to him? In a fit of rage Job finally challenges God. He never lost his faith, he still refused to curse God but he wanted answers.

God answered Job out of the whirlwind, basically chastising him for presuming to challenge his mysterious ways.

"Just who do you think you are questioning my wisdom?" God demanded, "Where were you when I created the world? If you know so much, answer me! Who keeps the earth from caving into itself, who closed the flood gates to hold back the sea? It was I who marked the boundary of the sea. I said stay where you are and go no further, here your raging waves will stop! Do you think you know what I know? Answer me!"

God's rebuke stopped Job dead in his tracks with an answer that answered everything but answered nothing. Job was humbled and bowed down satisfied but still perplexed by the unknowable mystery of God.

I encourage you to pick up your Bibles and turn to Job the next time you wonder why God allows terrible things to happen to good people. Maybe you won't get the answer you want but hopefully, like Job, you will be satisfied with God's unfathomable ways.

This is a lesson everyone needs to learn over and over again and the twelve disciples were no exception.

Jesus just pulled off one of his greatest miracles, feeding five thousand people with two loaves of bread and five fish. The people were naturally astounded and wanted Jesus to become their king. Not wanting any of it Jesus immediately packed the disciples off in a fishing boat and sailed towards the other side of the lake just in case the people's excitement was contagious and the disciples liked the idea of Jesus becoming a king.

Midway across one of the sudden violent storms that often blow over the Sea of Galilee threatened their lives. They were taking in water fast and on the verge of sinking. Terrified they called out to Jesus who the whole time was sleeping restfully on a pillow.

“Jesus, don’t you care that we’re sinking? How can you sleep at a time like this?”

Jesus woke up and immediately commanded the wind and waves, “Be quiet and still!” Then he turned on the disciples, “Why are you afraid, where is your faith?”

Jesus’ unexpected reprimand left them even more afraid, and puzzled. The raging storm on the lake was replaced by the spiritual storm in their souls. Perhaps Mother Nature obeyed Jesus’ command to calm and be stilled, but the disciples were another matter.

“Why are you afraid? Where is your faith?” You can almost hear the disappointment and sadness in Jesus’ voice.

Of course Jesus is forever asking the same question whenever our fear and doubts overwhelm us. Embarrassed and stunned, all we can answer back is, “Lord I have faith, but it’s not what it should be,” because the truth is, none of us measures up.

Stories of people like you and me either having or lacking faith and courage in times of crisis should leave us wondering, “How would I react if that happened to me? Would I cower in fear or would I be resolute and brave? Would I compromise convictions or stand up for my convictions even if it got me in deeper?”

One story that haunts me personally took place in Nazi occupied Denmark. A pastor, knowing there were German sympathizers sitting in his congregation stood up in the pulpit and declared, “I’d rather die with the Jews than serve under the Nazis. If anyone here didn’t hear me, I’ll gladly repeat it.”

I wonder, would I have been that brave to say the same thing knowing if I kept my mouth shut no one would blame me for being silent?

Every once in a while you catch yourself asking such questions until they pass away into your subconscious. Why do we let them pass? Probably because you soon get preoccupied with other things until you find yourself in your next crisis you really have no way of knowing.

Sometimes in magazines or online you find self-help tests designed to measure your suitability as a parent, a friend or a coworker. They’re usually questions that can be answered with a simple “yes” or “no.” If you answer correctly nine times out of ten you’re doing well, seven times you’re average, less than five you’re in trouble.

But where do you go to take a reliable test that measures your spiritual health?

I've heard that if you're consistent in taking care of the little things when the time comes you'll be ready to handle the big things life throws at you. It's probably true. If you work hard each day at being a faithful spouse, a loving parent, a loyal employee and a good neighbor chances are when times get rough you'll be ready to face anything. You become what you do.

"If you sow a thought, you reap an act.

If you sow an act, you reap a habit.

If you sow a habit, you reap a character.

If you sow a character, you reap a destiny.

Again, do the little things well then you'll be ready for the big things.

But who's to say you are doing the little things well, especially when no one else is looking?

Maybe this is a good time to revisit the story about Jesus and his disciples on the Sea of Galilee on that dark and stormy night.

We've already determined Jesus had to be disappointed by his disciples' lack of faith and abundance of fear when they faced that violent storm on the lake. This could have been the first of many opportunities Jesus had to fire them all on the spot and start the search for more suitable replacements. But he never did, even after the scene of their greatest failure on Good Friday Jesus still kept them in his inner circle. Every time they failed him, like the times they went straight into denial whenever he reminded them he was going to Jerusalem to be crucified, Jesus always forgave them.

Thank God Peter and the rest of them didn't work for Donald Trump. They'd have been out on their ears in record time. So what does this tell us?

Jesus' Gospel is all about second chances. Whenever your faith fails, God forgives you so you can try, try again. And Jesus forgave the disciples because he knew despite their failures they loved him and didn't want to disappoint him. Despite their flaws Jesus could see their desire to do and be the best they could for him was genuine.

That's what made the difference. If Jesus sensed they weren't cut out to be disciples, if they were unteachable posers out for themselves he never would have chosen them in the first place. But just by saying to the twelve, "O ye of little faith, why did you begin to doubt?" Jesus signaled that their little faith still had great potential and would ultimately serve them well when their time came to take on the responsibility to go out and make disciples of all nations.

If you remember last week's sermon, the parable of the mustard seed was included by Mark in his Gospel to reassure the early Christians that their tiny, scattered faith communities would soon sprout and grow beyond their imaginations because God did the growing.

Mark also included this story of the disciples' lack of faith to encourage the early Christians to watch and wait for the power of God coming to the rescue when life's storms rage and threatened to sink them. That small boat buffeted about in the storm represents the Church, the wind and waves symbolize the challenges we face. Sometimes we feel like we've been cast adrift in small sinkable boats to fend for ourselves on dark and stormy nights. That's when we cry out, "Jesus where are you, don't you care that we're sinking fast?"

Often God seems so far away. That's when we lose our nerve. But after the storm passes our boat is still floating. We didn't sink, causing us to realize the storm we really feared is the one found in us. Then comes the second realization that the peace that follows is also found in us when we finally listened to hear Jesus calmly say, 'Peace, be still.'

Psychologists tell us our post modern world is a recipe for the state of permanent anxiety. Everything today is getting faster and messier, the overheated economy, our shallow celebrity-driven culture, the threat of violence in the streets and now in our churches, who wouldn't be afraid?

In the middle of this mess is that tiny fishing boat, the Church, being tossed hither and yon.

"Where are you Lord? Don't you care if we're perishing too? What good are we if we sink too?"

And God through Christ gives us the same answer he gave to Job and countless others after him, the answer that answers everything and nothing, "Who are you to question my wisdom, where were you when I created the world? Do you think you know what I know?"

If like Job we are left humbled and bowed down, satisfied yet still perplexed by the unknowable ways of God, that's when we can then hear Jesus calling out to us over the winds and waves, "Be quiet, be still...why did you begin to doubt?"

Like it or not the resilient faith is born and nurtured in the storm. The potential for faith emerges from our fears and there's nothing wrong with being afraid unless you run away. And you won't run away from Jesus if you don't want to let him down. Of course you will let him down, but he comes back to pick you up so you can try, try again.

Sometimes the Lord calms the storm. Sometimes Jesus lets the storm rage. Either way, he always comes to calm us, if we let him.

Let us then brace ourselves for the inevitable hard and messy times that will come our way, all the while waiting for Jesus to share his courage with us so when the time comes, we can share our courage with others and welcome them on board our tiny ship, sometimes being tossed, other times enjoying the calm and all the time under the watchful eye of Jesus.