

SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 7B

Job 38:1-11

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Psalm 107:1-3,23-32

First Immanuel Lutheran Church,

Portland, OR

2 Cor 6:1-13

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MARK 4:35-41

“There’s a storm on the way!” Bonny and Debbie told me as I left the office one evening not long ago. They said it was a bad one. I kind of laughed it off, since it looked pretty clear outside to me. But as I drove down 19th past Couch Park, I did notice the wind was blowing pretty hard, leaves swirling around on the sidewalks and some small branches down from the trees. People were clutching their jackets around them and running for cover, their hair flying. On Everett, a shop owner was taking in the furniture that’s usually displayed on the sidewalk, and the way she was wrestling with the door in the wind started to remind me of Dorothy at the start of the *Wizard of Oz*, wrestling with that cellar door as the twister was closing in.

I got on the highway with all the other rush hour drivers, and immediately traffic bogged down. Looking out across the city I could see a wall of black clouds coming from the south. About that time I switched on the radio, and instead of my usual NPR news I hear that emergency warning signal and a very serious male voice: “We interrupt this program to bring you an emergency announcement. A severe thunderstorm warning has been issued for the greater Portland area.” I learned that Oregon City had been hit hard and several thousand homes were without electricity. The voice was particularly stern concerning boat safety: “If you are out in a boat, come to shore immediately. This is a severe storm, with lightning and high winds. I repeat, get off the water as quickly as possible!”

Well, I wasn’t in a boat, but still I was starting to wonder if I should even be outside with these ominous black clouds coming on and raindrops splashing on my windshield. I called home to warn Aaron not to take Andrew to T-ball practice. “Actually, the weather looks okay here at home.” “No, you have to believe me, there’s a storm on the way!” Fortunately, I got home before the worst of it broke. And we were really glad *not* to be on the T-ball field as we lined up by the window to watch lightning flashing and thunder crashing, and torrents of rain drenching the trees as they twisted in the wind.

Storms at sea are different from storms on the land. The fishermen in our scripture reading knew that, and they knew enough to be afraid of this particular storm. With the waves beating and the boat rocking and the water pouring in, they were powerless to steer, or even to bail. They knew they were going down unless the weather changed.

There was nothing they could do to save themselves. And there, in the back of the boat, was Jesus — asleep! “Don’t you even *care* that we’re about to die?” Their panic rose as they shook him awake. But Jesus wasn’t afraid. He spoke calmly and powerfully to the storm — in the same commanding voice he used to call the demons out of suffering people: “Peace! Be still!” And suddenly it *was* still. Which, in its own way, was even more terrifying than the storm — to see that kind of power coming out from Jesus. The kind of power only God could give.

When I was a young adult, I used to love this passage about Jesus stilling the storm. I liked it because of the happy ending. Jesus makes the storm go away. Jesus gets you home safely, and later on you can tell stories about how scared you were. When I was young, *that’s the kind of Jesus I wanted in my life.* A savior to make everything come out right in the end. A God to make the storms go away, calm my nerves, see me safely through. I used to think that’s what this Bible passage meant — that if you could hang on long enough, Jesus would see you through. If you believed deeply enough, if you became prayerful and centered enough, God would give you the ability to remain calm and serene, like Jesus was, even in the face of trouble.

I was off-base. There is a promise here about God’s power to save. And something about the God-given gift of peace in the midst of storms. But as for Jesus commanding away all life’s troubles — that was just a young person’s fantasy.

Real life makes it clear that things don’t work exactly that way. People get sick and die, people do serious damage to themselves, some people even cause their own deaths, without Jesus swooping in to stop it. People are abused. Hunger and poverty sap their life. People can do terrible things to each other, run planes into skyscrapers, commit atrocities in war, and for some reason God allows it to happen. One pastor I know cried out in frustration: “Just go to any hospital. Just visit any jail. You’ll see that for too many people, the boat’s going down, and *God is taking a nap!*” Those were strong words, born out of compassion for hurting people, but they’re not so different from the disciples crying out: “Lord, don’t you *care* that we’re dying?”

Yet when we believe the Christian promise, then we believe that God *does* care. Not just cares, but that God *acts decisively* to save people. God says, “Peace! Be still!” to the swirling forces of chaos that can leave us feeling powerless. When we believe the witness of scripture, and the witness of generations of believers, then we believe that *God is our defense, in the storms and always.* I do believe that, and I’ll tell you why.

First of all, I see this passage as a necessary reality check about who is truly powerful in the world. In our me-centered lives it is easy to forget that it’s not us but *God*

who is the power of the universe. The reality is, we human beings *are* ultimately powerless to save ourselves. Oh, we can do good things with our lives, and we should. We can help other people, we can work for justice — all in the strength God's Spirit gives. But we cannot ultimately save this world by our own strength. And we certainly cannot save ourselves. We cannot forgive our own sins. We cannot wipe the slate clean. We cannot even straighten our own lives out, without the intervening power of Christ to change us. We depend on *God's* power to save.

Even when we don't approve of how God uses God's power, we depend on it. Even when we don't understand how Jesus can be sleeping in the boat while people are in danger, it is Jesus we call upon for help. Something deep within us knows that God is the only one we *can* call on, with any confidence. When the wind whips up the waves, we cry out to God. And when we survive the storms, it's God we thank. Even when the storms hurt us or injure people we care about, it is God we grieve to. Where else would we go?

In real life not everyone is rescued. Not all storms are stilled. Of course not. They aren't in the Bible, either. Remember that the "happy ending" story we read today was not the end of Jesus' story. There was no miraculous rescue for Jesus on the cross. A ferocious storm took him *all the way under* that day. He died, he was buried, and his friends grieved him. It was only out of that hopeless, final, devastating death that God brought Jesus back to life.

And by that act, God used God's ultimate power to bring *all God's children* out of death forever. All the awesome power of God — power enough to stop the storm and still the waves -- all that power was translated into *love* for us. Strong love. Powerful love. Ultimate love. To show us that no matter what death we die — and we all *will* die — we will never die to God. And no matter what storms may steal our feeble human power, God's power, God's loving power, remains strong and remains with us and remains for us. Because God's ultimate power is not to destroy but to save. To save us, and save all creation. To lead us all to a new life beyond every death.

No, we don't always approve of how God uses God's power. It doesn't always look like love to us. But — there is more to this universe than what you and I are able to see. For all the storms that do come in our lives, what other storms is God still holding back? In what ways is God still sheltering us, saving us, keeping us, guarding us? And in what paths is God ultimately leading us? We cannot see or know. We can only trust in God's ultimate love and God's ultimate goodness — the everlasting goodness we see in Christ.

Amen.