

Finding God Amid a Crisis

One of my character traits is that I like to be in control, to call the shots, chart my own course, and make decisions that lead to a predictable outcome. (Don't we all?) I hope it's not ego but a conditioning from the freedom I have been given. A roll I have grown accustomed to, from my profession and organization I work in. I feel able to solve any technical challenge our clients throw at us. I rely on my training and logical thought process to be able come up with good solutions... But when it comes to spiritual things I struggle to let go and trust that God will lead. I fail to put my full confidence in God, rely on myself, become anxious, then doubt. When faced with a crisis I often become freighted and do not see things as clearly as they are; like the disciples did when battling strong winds when Jesus walked up to them on the sea.

Strong wind is prominent in Matthew's Gospel story for today, as well as the reading from 1 Kings. Strong winds were also prominent over the past week in our family, creating our own crisis, so to speak.

We can't always control things, like I prefer, especially when it comes to the weather. Last weekend two of my adult children embarked on a trip to climb Mount Rainer in Washington State. They planned that trip for a long time, they; applied for a permit, attended a mountaineering course, learned how to self-rescue if they fell into a crevasse as they crossed a glacier field, climbed other peaks so they understood how their bodies would react in higher altitude, and conditioned themselves. Our son, flew to Seattle from New Hampshire to join his sister and her boyfriend on the climb. They were all knowledgeable, skilled, and prepared. They made the climb as far as Camp Muir, the base camp and decided not to go further. Gale force winds determined the fate of their climb. They were concerned that while climbing from the base camp to the summit the next day their unattended tents would be blown away and upon returning from the summit they would have no shelter and be exposed to the elements the following night. They wisely made the choice not to proceed. The strong wind ruined their plans to summit Mt Rainer.

But the wind wasn't finished with their plans yet. Our son attempted to return home the day hurricane Isaias hit New England. His flight from Seattle took off as scheduled but when the plane attempted to land in New Hampshire the winds were too strong and they abruptly aborted. They circled around to give it another try. Meanwhile two other planes attempted landing, and both aborted. The pilot came on the speaker and informed the passengers that they were not going to make another attempt, but divert to Philadelphia and try again the next day. Our son called me from the airport there, happy to be safe; joyful and calm. However in the background I could overhear unhappy passengers facing their crisis; having to spend the night sleeping in a chair at the Philadelphia airport; masks on during COVID. Another part of the trip influenced by the strong winds.

The disciples in the Gospel faced strong winds too. Jesus sent them ahead to the other side of the sea. They struggled in the boat for many hours; they left before sunset and their encounter takes place late in the night. They are miles offshore. Jesus in prayer on the mountain overlooking the sea could not have seen them; it was dark, and they were far off. Their distance from shore assured no one could hear any cries

for help as well. If anyone was tossed out of the boat they would surely drown. But Jesus knows they are in trouble and comes to their aid. In the midst of their crisis, the boat being tossed about by wind driven waves miles from shore, the disciples are terrified and believe they see a ghost as Jesus comes toward them. In that struggle, locked in fear and bound by their own perception, they did not recognizing Jesus walking on the sea; who he was and the power he has; the "... Son of God".¹

What might we glean from the actions of Peter, the other disciples, and Jesus that give us courage in the face of our crises? God sends us out as he did the disciples and likewise we may not feel fully equipped for our mission. God allows us to struggle too, in order to grow committed and learn. When we recognize Jesus we are filled with excitement and encouragement, jump out to follow him, to act like him. But because of doubt and lack of confidence, we regress and become overwhelmed and frightened by the situation around us forgetting about the strength that only comes from him. We rely on our own abilities, our plans, what we can accomplish, and not on the strength that comes from Jesus.

We have all faced strong winds in our lives, not only winds that stop our plan to climb a peak or fly into an airport. These winds may be in the form of sickness, loss of a job, loss of a loved one, a broken relationship... Things, no matter how we try, we cannot control. Nevertheless, despite the power of the unanticipated strong winds, we encounter our gentle and caring God there to stretch out his hand and catch us. We may have to struggle for a while, to come to grips with the reality of the situation, but he is there when we really need him. In the throes of our initial crisis, there is chaos, exacerbated by our fear, we may become confused and not recognize that Jesus is there with us. For as Jesus spoke to his disciples we need to remember... "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid."² We can take consolation that when Jesus got into the boat the wind died down. Likewise when Jesus comes into our lives, into our boat, we have the reassurance these strong winds driving the waves in our lives will eventually calm down and become a gentle refreshing breeze.

How can we find God in all of this even in the midst of our crisis? We can find Jesus and his strength here in the Mass; in our faith community and the Eucharist we are about to receive. We also need to pray and be alone with God. Last week's Gospel started with Jesus withdrawing by himself to a deserted place after he heard of the fate of John the Baptist. That time of prayer was interrupted by showing his compassion and feeding the crowds; but he needs to return to prayer. Jesus now sends his disciples off ahead of him, dismisses the crowds and goes to the mountain at night to pray. Jesus needed quiet time with the Father in prayer; we need that too.

Elijah, in a quest to find the Lord, also went to a mountain; he took shelter in a cave. He was then told to "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, the Lord will pass by."³ Elijah too experiences; the power of a strong heavy wind, (that wind shredded the mountains and crushed the rock) and then an earthquake, followed by

¹ Mt 14:33.

² Mt 14:27.

³ 1 Kings 19:11.

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Matthew 14: 22-33.

fire. God the all-powerful, creator of the universe⁴, has the forces of nature at his control. However the Lord was not in any of these manifestations of great power. After experiencing all that power, Elijah found the Lord in a tiny whispering sound.

If we are overwhelmed we need to cry out as Peter did; “Lord, save me”⁵ and not be overcome by the strong winds that challenge us, earthquakes we experience that shake us to the core, or the fire of activity that may consume us. We need to have courage and trust in God, remove our doubt, and listen quietly for that tiny whispering sound of God.

Maybe that saying attributable to Winston Churchill “Never let a good crisis go to waste” has more relevance than I could have ever imagined. A crisis that can seem so overwhelming and scary might just be an opportunity to draw closer to God.

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⁴ CCC 283.

⁵ Mt 14:32.