

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Sleeping Through the Storm”

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*On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, ‘Let us go across to the other side.’ And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. 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?’ 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. He said to them, ‘Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?’ 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?’*

My best friend Nick called me the other night and we reminisced about a few things, including a Biology Club trip to Chicago when we were in ninth grade. It was our first trip to the big city and we were staying at the famous Conrad Hilton, on the twenty-second floor. Nick and his roommate were in a room down the hall from the room I shared with another friend. My room was the center of social activity, junk food and card games and general teenage giddiness. At about two in the morning though we were startled by a strange sound. A man in a clipboard was knocking on the door, telling us that there was a fire on the floor and we must prepare or evacuate. As I opened the door further I could see smoke coming from the elevator lobby and fireman making their way up the stairway. My heart went into my throat. I ran down to Nick’s room and began pounding on the door, “Get up, there’s a fire! You’ve got to get up and get ready to leave!” There was no reply and no sign of life from Nick’s room. I continued to bang on the door and yell for what seemed like minutes. No response. Soon the man with the clipboard disappeared and a Chicago policeman moved through the hall telling us to simply return to our rooms. The fire, perhaps started by an arsonist, was out. We should go to sleep. But of course I couldn’t sleep, worrying about whether or not the arsonist would return and we would be choked to death by thick, toxic smoke. I stayed awake all night. The next morning I found Nick at breakfast. He had slept through the entire thing. We were all about to die and he did not seem to realize it. Yes, he said, he heard some commotion but he said he was too tired to get up and see what it was.

Listening to President Obama’s remarks made recently from the sight of a Nazi concentration camp, I remembered a cartoon I once saw about the Holocaust. It was actually a comic strip borrowed and published in the journal Publisher’s Weekly. The cartoon presented a rather chilling message. In the comic there were two mice, offering commentary about the presence of God from inside their concentration camp. One mouse says, “I hold onto my bowl and my shoe falls off. I pick up the shoe and my

pants fall down...what can I do? I only have two hands! My God. Please God...help me find a piece of string to hold up my pants and a shoe that fits my foot." Under the comic strip panel runs the words, "But here God didn't come. We were all on our own."

Alone and unable to do anything. Abandoned by God in the midst of a raging storm. Needing God's help but not even able to find God.

In the wake of the economic disaster, auto crisis and the Chrysler and General Motors bankruptcies; the following scene has been played out too many times. For some of you, I know it is quite personal. You are called into the office and told that your services are no longer needed. Just like that you are out of work. The life that was somewhat under control and predictable suddenly becomes unglued. There are worries about pension, mortgages and medical benefits. You are overwhelmed and you might even wonder if there is any way to discover the help and love of God in such unpredictable times.

A little over a year ago my sister-in-law Patty called me from the parking lot of her doctor's office in Ogden, UT. She had just received a staggering report. She had breast cancer. No one else knew, not even her husband. She had to call somebody to talk and at that time I was the only one who answered the phone. She was stunned, not knowing what to do next. Her world had suddenly changed and even the next breath seemed terrifying. She asked me, "Why did God let this happen?" I had no answer. I could only cry with her and tell her that Laura and I would help in whatever way we could.

In the Scripture lesson from the gospel of Mark there is this wonderful story about Jesus and his disciples. The scene is a vivid one, one straight out of movie or a good mystery book. The disciples and Jesus are at the end of a long day of teaching and preaching. They are looking for some rest and relaxation. Jesus says, "Let's go over to the other side of the sea." And so they left the needs of the crowd behind and get in a boat to cross the Sea of Galilee. All of the men were tired, worn out, and exhausted. While on the trip, a furious squall came up and the waves began to break over the boat. The disciples, albeit experienced fishermen, suddenly found themselves in a situation that they could not control. They feared for their safety. They feared for their lives. And all the while they feared and fretted and stressed out, Jesus was in the back of the boat sound asleep.

The disciples woke him saying, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown? Are you leaving us alone in our fear? Can't you see what we are going through?" And Jesus got up, rebuked the wind, and spoke to the waves. "Peace," he said. "Be still." Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. Jesus then turned to his disciples and said, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have your faith?"

The disciples looked at one another with questions and with fear. "Who is this guy? Even the wind and the waves obey him." They knew that they were in a situation that was completely out of their control. They knew that they had exhausted their resources in dealing with the problem. They were ready to give in to their panic. They had looked for Jesus to help them, to remove the storm- the waves and wind. And yet he was sleeping.

This story then moves from the powerlessness of the disciples to the power of Jesus or perhaps most correctly the trust of the disciples in Jesus' power. Jesus calmed the storm and then had to encourage the faith of his followers. "Why are you so

afraid? Didn't you know that there are storms in the midst of life? Where is your faith? Faith is not escaping storms. The wind and waves are not always silent. Faith is harder. It is trusting that I am in the boat with you, that I do care, and that in some way your faithful actions in the midst of the storm will bring God's purposes to be. You have no faith unless you trust in my love, even in the midst of the storm.

This isn't the way we would like it to be. We would like to command the wind and the waves to be silent whenever we wish. We would like to walk into the room of a sick friend and order him or her to be well. We would like to stretch out our hand and chase all of the evil that humanity might threaten away. We would like to everyone to realize how unfair this present economic situation is and move them to immediately buy the products we make so that everyone can go back to work and be happy. Instead we are stuck with the storm, the fears, and the sense of being overwhelmed without a plan for tomorrow. The miracles of the Kingdom of God are sometimes slow in coming and not always impressive from our point of view. The power of Jesus is not automatic according to our need and certainly not as timely as we might expect from a Messiah.

William Willimon writes, "Jesus is in the boat asleep. He will not be jerked around by the fears of his disciples. 'Faith' means the willingness, even the eagerness to be with God as God is, rather than as we would have God to be." Faith then is the trust, possibly even the challenge of knowing God is there even when it doesn't seem that God is focused upon our woes or working for us in the storm.

Jim Eaton, a friend of mine and minister at the First Congregational Church in Owosso, MI wrote on a Facebook blog this week of his experience flying from Nashville to Detroit. Jim's wife is a flight attendant and Jim flies twenty times a year. He knows just where to sit and how to interpret every noise the aircraft makes. On this particular flight he was seated next to a woman who was obviously flying for the very first time. As the airplane prepared to take off, Jim spoke with her alerting her to the procedure and what she might see and feel. In terror she gripped the armrest between them until Jim took his hand and put it over hers. She grabbed his hand with the strength of no handshake he had ever felt. As the plane began to make its descent into Detroit, Jim took the initiative and began to explain what would happen during landing. The woman nodded quietly with renewed apprehension. As the plane entered the clouds near airport she turned to Jim and said, "Will you hold my hand again?" Thus this woman faced the fears of the storms of flying, holding tightly and trusting in the assurance of a hand.

Like the disciples we may sometimes wonder if we have been brought into the middle of a storm that will wipe us out and take away our lives. There are days and hours and minutes we don't see Jesus, we don't know if he is there. That is when we need the gift of faith. Faith is believing Jesus is in the boat with us. Faith is trusting that Jesus is holding our hand. Faith is living; knowing that way that we follow has the potential to calm the storm and to still the soul.