

Pentecost 4, 6.20.2021

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Job 38:1-11; Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32; 2 Corinthians 6:1-13; Mark 4:35-41

“Grace in the Storm”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

Good morning. I wish all fathers a happy and blessed Father’s Day. May God bless, guide and strengthen all fathers and all father-figures in our lives! May you each continue to be strengthened to encourage, lead, mentor and serve families, friends, and communities. Amen.

I’d like to begin today’s meditation with a story. On January 13-14, 1979 a major blizzard dumped almost 30 inches of snow on Chicago, paralyzing the city and closing O’Hare Airport for 96 hours. The “Blizzard of 1979” had winds of almost 40 miles per hour. Prior to the storm, only two to four inches had been forecast, and on Sunday morning, the snow drifts at the church where my father was pastor, reached up to the eaves of the second floor. The front door of the parsonage was completely covered and blocked with snow.

I remember the storm well, in part, because the church sexton and his wife had left for holiday in Arizona, having asked my brother and I to “just sweep off the sidewalks” if we got a dusting of snow. In reality the snow was so heavy that the snowblower eventually broke and my brother and I were left shoveling the walks around the church by hand.

I mention this story because it resulted in one of the most famous political turn of events in Chicago history. Incumbent mayor, Michael Bilandic, was voted out of office just one month later because the snowplows had not been running during the storm. Mayor Bilandic, mercilessly and rather foolishly, told residents that they would be ticketed if their cars were not moved, so the streets could be plowed. It didn’t help that a local newspaper reported that the only two streets plowed and clear were the streets where mayor Bilandic and the late former mayor Richard J. Daley’s residences were. Hence, the common wisdom for the past forty years in Chicago has been, “If there is even one flake of snow, send out the plows - your political life depends on it.”

The blizzard resulted in a “blizzard of troubles” for the city and the mayor. I wish I could take credit for the phrase “blizzard of troubles,” but it comes from a sermon by the fourth century Bishop of Constantinople, John Chrysostom, who called Paul’s list of afflictions in the second reading today, a “blizzard of troubles.” The phrase “blizzard of troubles” is a reminder that our lives are filled with affliction and challenge – from the time of Jesus, to Paul, to Chrysostom, and even to mayors Bilandic and Byrne; from Corinth, to Constantinople, to Chicago, to us today – we share a

human propensity for afflictions and troubles, of being beset by both forces of nature and forces of our own making.

These past fifteen and a half months have been a time, to use Paul's words, of "*afflictions, hardships and calamities.*" We have experienced an unprecedented combination of pandemic, political strife and social division that is a reminder of the brokenness of human community and the need for God's grace. Though I am by nature an optimistic person, I also know that as human beings we are profoundly bent inward upon ourselves. As Paul wrote in Romans 7, "*For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.*"

People know the good they should do, yet they often fail to implement the good they know is possible. This is a sign of how deeply sin resides in us. We know, for example, that racism and discrimination are wrong. Yet we persist in racist and discriminatory systems and behavior. We know that we should pool our resources and work together across partisan aisles, yet we persist in maligning one another. We know that we share a common humanity with all nations and peoples: "*For God so loved the world that he sent his only Son,*" yet we persist in mistrusting, fighting against, and even killing one another. These past fifteen and a half months have been a time of, as Paul says, "*afflictions, hardships and calamities.*" Though it hasn't been snowing, we have seen a "blizzard of troubles."

In today's second reading Paul was writing about his experience as a Christian in the world. He and his fellow missionaries had known "*beatings, riots, labors, imprisonments, sleepless nights and hunger.*" All of the afflictions Paul described, in his "blizzard of troubles," were human in origin.

Later in today's service, we will pray as our Lord has taught us, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." These words should remind us of our inner weakness to temptation and even evil. It is telling that Jesus teaches us to pray in this way, because he knows how in need we are of God's grace.

I once worked with a fellow who had a baseball cap that read, "Lead me not into temptation - I can find it myself." That, in essence is the substance of Paul's words today about "*afflictions, hardship and calamities,*" many of them are brought on by our own human sinfulness – storms and blizzards of troubles – and as that cap read, "I can find them myself."

Yet notice how Paul begins today's epistle, "*As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain.*" Paul encouraged the Corinthians to actively accept God's grace

as the power of God that would help them in the afflictions, hardships and calamities – in the storms of human life. Paul quoted Isaiah 49, “*At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.*” God’s grace is not to be taken for granted; rather, God’s grace is the power to help us make wise decisions and just actions in this world each and every day.

It has become incredibly unfashionable today to speak of human sinfulness, or even to use the word “sin.” As modern people we tell ourselves that given enough time and enough resources we can overcome every human problem, solve every existential dilemma, and so with overly optimistic human pride we accept God’s grace in vain.

Yet Paul goes on in the epistle today to catalog the “*afflictions, hardship and calamities*” he has faced, telling us “*we have commended ourselves in every way by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God.*” Paul credited his journey through these storms of affliction, not to himself, but to “*the power of God.*” The power of God is the grace that Paul commended to the Corinthians saying, “*Now is an acceptable time now is the day of salvation.*”

God’s grace makes us into the people of God and people of grace - into people capable of overcoming a pandemic, racism, political strife and social division. Without God’s grace, we are like Paul: we know the good we should do, but the evil we do not want is what we do. Without God’s grace, we pray “lead me not into temptation, but eventually find it ourselves in the midst of temptation and evil. God’s grace is the salvation available to us each and every day.

The well-known gospel reading for today about Jesus asleep in the boat during a storm is not simply an isolated story of Jesus calming a storm. There are really two storms in this story: the storm on the lake, and the storm of fear and anxiety in the hearts of the disciples. The storm in the disciples’ hearts and minds is made clear in their collective words, “*Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?*” Like the storm on the lake, the storms of this world lead human beings to say, “Jesus, do you not care that we are perishing?” During the events the past fifteen and a half months of a global pandemic, ongoing racism, political strife and social division, we have all cried out, “Jesus, do you not care that we are perishing?”

The words Jesus used to calm the storm – “*Be still!*” – are also the same Greek words used when Jesus healed a man possessed by an unclean spirit in the synagogue at Capernaum. In Mark 1 Jesus says, “*Be silent and come out of him.*” In the words, “*Be silent, be still!*” Jesus, the living Word of God, speaks and calms the human heart in the storms of the world.

Mark's gospel presents Jesus as God's Son whose words bring peace in the storms of the world and in the storms of the human heart. For all of our modernity, we should not dismiss a man possessed by an unclean spirit, for we too have seen, time and time again these fifteen months, human beings possessed by anger and rage, neglect and willful murder, riot and disunity. For all of our modernity, we are no different than our forbears; we are in need of Jesus' liberating grace.

The church is often depicted as a boat or a ship sailing upon the stormy seas of this world. The church is the vessel of salvation, and Jesus pilots this ship offering safe passage. We must not forget that when Jesus and his disciples were in that boat they were also headed in mission "to the other side." Jesus was going to the land of the Gerasenes to heal a man possessed. We, too, are in mission, even when the world is buffeted by winds and storm we continue in mission because Jesus is with us, leading us to the other side. We are always moving forward in mission, even during a pandemic.

"Jesus says, *"Peace! Be still!"*; his words give not only calm, but also renewal and direction for living. Jesus' disciples leave us with the question, *"Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"* Who is this that liberated the man possessed by an unclean spirit? Who is this who even today offers us liberation and grace in the storms of life? Who is this who frees and restores us to our right minds when we are possessed by the spirits of this world? *"See now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!"*

With *"afflictions, hardship and calamities,"* Paul is describing all the variables, the many storms and blizzards of trouble in our lives. Paul is naming the truth about our human condition as sinful people, who even in the storm, want our way, who even in the storm cry out *"Lord, do you not care that we are perishing?"* If sinfulness is part of our DNA, rather than relying upon our own very limited power, rather than relying upon things that divide us even further, such partisan politics, nationalist rhetoric, racism, and cultural superiority, Paul reminds us to rely upon the only force of nature that can truly liberate us from the storms of life – Jesus Christ.

Quoting Isaiah, Paul writes, *"At an acceptable time I have listened to you, I have helped you."* Each day God listens to and helps us. Each day God give us grace in the storms of life. So that with grace, we can become signs of God's grace for others who are tossed and afraid in the storms of life.

With Jesus, there is grace in the storm. Live as grace in the storm for others. Amen.