

PEACE IN THE STORM

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Grace Church in New York
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But (Jesus) 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?" (Mark 4:38)

Way back in early 2004, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, otherwise known as NASA, safely landed two solar-powered, mobile robots on the surface of Mars. The names of the robots were Spirit and Opportunity, and after a hazardous crossing of many millions of miles, the two machines, or rovers, began what NASA officials designed to be a 90-day mission of scientific experiments and exploration. Surprisingly, when the two rovers reached their 90-day limit, both were still going strong, so the missions continued. Five years later Spirit became stuck in a sand trap and could not drive out of it. Eventually, the rover ceased communicating, and NASA reluctantly declared that Spirit's mission, though now finished, had been a resounding success. The little robot had defied the expectations.

The rover Opportunity has proved itself to be even more remarkable. This robot, also designed to last 90-days, remains active a full 14 ½ years after landing. Sadly, its days may be numbered. You see, what is taking place right now on the surface of Mars is a massive dust storm that has engulfed the entire planet. Mars has always been prone to dust storms. Even hundreds of years ago, people on Earth looking through primitive telescopes were able to detect them. But the current storm is especially severe, like nothing planet Earth has ever produced. Martian soil is fine as talcum powder. The planet offers little gravity and no vegetation to hold it in place when the wind blows. The thin atmosphere is now so filled with whirling dust that the sun is blocked, meaning Opportunity may lose all power and be unable to recover. Opportunity has survived much, and beaten the odds again and again. But the current storm might be more than it can withstand, and the rover may perish.

Of course, we need not look all the way to Mars to see crippling storms. We have plenty of them here on Earth: those of our own making, and those belonging to the natural order. Take, for example, today's reading from the Gospel of Mark. Mark describes how Jesus and his disciples were rowing a boat across the Sea of Galilee. Behind them on land was a storm – a storm of people that had been following the little group wherever they went. The crowds at times were hostile, as crowds often will be. They pressed in on Jesus almost crushing him on several occasions, trying to get close to him for healing and wisdom. Some in the crowd were plotting deliberately to crush him. They were Pharisees – the religious authorities – who didn't like Jesus' invading their turf. We can imagine how Jesus and the disciples were exhausted from the constant whirling winds of the crowd. Perhaps it was out of self-preservation that Jesus announced that they should head across the Sea of Galilee to the other side.

The Sea of Galilee is about 8 miles wide and 13 miles long. It has steep banks around it on all sides, so the wind can do tricky things. I've never been to the Holy Land, but I've read for years how sudden, violent storms can whip up the waves with terrifying power. This week, not content to take a Biblical commentary's word for it, I looked up "Sea of Galilee storms" on YouTube, and there they were: six-foot waves that could easily swamp a little fishing boat. What the disciples and Jesus didn't know was that as they rowed away from the storm on land, they were heading right into one of these storms at sea. Mark tells us how a great windstorm arose and began battering the boat, threatening to sink it. It would take all hands working together if they were to

survive, so the disciples called out to Jesus, who was oddly enough, asleep in the stern. “Teacher”, they said, “do you not care that we are perishing?” Well, as luck would have it, he really did care. Jesus awoke, rebuked the wind and commanded the turbulent, angry sea to settle into a still, quiet calm. It was a miracle – a grand, interventionist miracle.

What do you think: Did Jesus really calm the storm with a rebuke? Does God intervene in the affairs of the world? Even the most skeptical of historians and commentators admit that Jesus must have worked some types of miracles around the Sea of Galilee to attract the attention he did. Whether these miracles were healings, exorcisms, stilling storms, or all of the above is no longer possible to determine with historical accuracy. What is clear is that the disciples and Mark told and retold this story as an example of what it was like to be in the presence of Jesus. Thus, it was legitimate then, and it is legitimate now, to interpret the story both historically and metaphorically. The gift of Jesus is peace in the midst of whatever storm is besetting you.

Consider Jesus in the little storm-tossed boat. We get so distracted by the obvious miracle of stilling the storm that I think we miss a miracle that is perhaps more meaningful, even more redemptive than the grand intervention. What was Jesus doing in the midst of the storm that had everyone else utterly and completely terrified? Jesus was sleeping. Today I want to preach not so much Christ crucified, not so much Christ risen from the dead, but Christ sleeping. Apparently, he even managed to find himself a little pillow! Jesus was taking a nap, something neither church nor society wants you to do. The world seems to have a vendetta against sleeping. We get up at the crack of dawn, we work, study, or celebrate until late at night, and to stay awake we drink all manner of caffeinated beverages in between. In some circles it is a badge of honor to make it on four or five hours of sleep every night, or even better, to pull an all-nighter.

The church has it in for sleeping, too. We associate sleeping with unfaithfulness and spiritual sloth. We have midnight masses, all-night vigils, sunrise services, and youth group sleepovers. We even have an entire liturgical season devoted to the virtue of staying awake: Advent. Apparently, you’re not a true follower of Jesus unless your eyelids are propped open with toothpicks! Who can take a nap and not feel guilty about it? I’ll tell you who: Jesus. Today Jesus is asleep in the back of the boat. So today – perhaps just today – Jesus is not requiring us to still any storms, or save any worlds, or champion any cause. Perhaps just today – he’s daring us to trust, and leave the saving to him, according to his own timetable.

It’s essentially the same message we hear God deliver to Job in today’s Old Testament reading (Job 38:1-11). Leave the saving to God. Job, as you likely know, was a righteous man who enjoyed smooth sailing through life. He had a happy family and wealth beyond anyone’s imagination. And then the storm hit, furiously and relentlessly. Invading armies attacked his family, killing them all and plundering his wealth. Then Job himself fell ill to a painful and debilitating disease. Job demanded explanations, and his friends tried to defend the ways of God. They reasoned that bad things happen only to bad people. Job, therefore, must have sinned to bring on the storm. If Job were to repent he could regain control and save himself.

Job disagreed. He’d done nothing wrong, and demanded answers from God. Finally, as we heard today, *the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind*. What I hear God saying to Job is something like this: *Job, this existence that I’ve chosen to share with you as a gift is a far bigger thing than you can either understand or imagine. You just have to trust me. I’ve got this, and you don’t.* It seems to me that Jesus implied the same to the disciples when they woke him from sleep. Much annoyed, he asked, “*Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?*” So today’s counter-cultural Word of the Lord is this: be like Jesus and take a nap. Get some sleep. Find yourself a pillow. (I note, parenthetically, that the rover, Opportunity’s only hope in the storm is to do the same: take a nap. It is to power down and go to sleep until the storm passes.)

Alas, you and I know that merely resting in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is not the fullness of the gospel. The flip side of the coin is what Jesus said at the very beginning of the passage: *Let us go across to the other side*. That little boat on the Sea of Galilee is the church, in microcosm, on a mission. Whatever storms happen to be around us or ahead of us, our challenge is to head into them, trusting that Jesus is aboard. Jesus is here as a very present help in trouble. But where, you ask? How is Jesus present, and how do we rouse him from sleep? Well, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is present in the Word and Sacrament, so that we can hear and taste and see how gracious the Lord is. By the power of the Spirit he makes himself known to us in our prayer and worship and fellowship. Indeed, where even two or three are gathered together in his name, there you have the church, and there he is in the midst of us. Yes, we can relax and rest in his presence, but we also hear his commission: *Let us go across to the other side*. We have a job to do and places to go.

Among the blessings and burdens of life in Christ at Grace Church are the constant reminders of those who have gone before us. Perhaps the most fearsome of these is the portrait bust of the 5th Rector, Henry Codman Potter in the north transept. Potter served as rector from 1868 until he was elected Bishop of New York in 1883, and it was he who aroused Grace Church from its fashionable slumber to address the needs of the city's poor. Under Potter Grace Church moved from being a family parish to a vigorous institution with a vast array of programs to help the downtrodden reach for a better life. From his perch in the north transept, and in the large oil painting of him on the 3rd floor of the parish house, and in other representations I've seen around the diocese, Potter is never smiling. In fact he glares down at us, perhaps because the work is never done. I hardly think he would approve of the afternoon nap I am planning to take today! This morning, some of Henry Codman Potter's descendants are with us in worship. They are remarkably cheerful people with smiles on their faces, so they may have more insight into Henry Potter's perpetual grimace than I do. Suffice it to say, my guess is that the future bishop loved the season of Advent. Sleepers, wake up! Let us go to the other side. Let's get moving.

Jesus' invitation is ever before us. It is always to open ourselves to the Spirit of the living God through Word and Sacrament, in prayer and worship. When we do, God merges his Spirit with our spirits, and we become the Body of Christ. Does God intervene in the world? Yes, indeed, through us. By the power of the Spirit working within us, we are God's intervention – we the church, and each one of us individually. So there you have the two sides of the same coin, or even the paradox of the Christian life: resting in Jesus, and following him to the other side. You'll hear echoes of both in today's hymns: "Let all mortal flesh keep silence," and "Stand up, stand up for Jesus."

Some years ago a parishioner of Grace Church sent me a note because he suspected God had roused him from sleep so that he could intervene in someone else's storm. He writes:

Last Friday, I woke up early to work out in our building gym downstairs. Upon entering, I saw one of our residents lying flat on his back. After yelling at him to see if he was merely resting, I immediately knew something was wrong. I pressed the intercom to alert the doormen to call 911. I then started CPR. After several minutes, I was able to resuscitate him but then he went flat line again so I had to continue. The paramedics finally arrived, resuscitated him, and he went flat line again. After more CPR and some defibrillator shocks, he finally stabilized and was transported to the hospital.

Based on security video footage, I arrived a mere 4 minutes after he fell to the floor and disappeared from view of the gym cameras. I learned that 5 minutes is a critical time for someone to maintain normal brain function. I'm pleased to report that he is out of the ICU,

talking and walking, and early signs appear to show that neurologically he is sound. The amazing part is that I never work out on Friday mornings. Something caused me to wake up that morning at 5:30 am and head to the gym around 6 am, all within minutes of when this resident had a heart attack. I believe God was looking over him and sent me there to find him.

What do you think? God or coincidence? Does God intervene in the affairs of the world, even in the life of an individual? Does God really care when any child of the earth is perishing? Do you?

I pray that we do care, because when hearts are open and hands are willing, the Spirit of the Lord merges with our spirits, and God intervenes in the storms through us.

Jesus said, "*Let us go across to the other side.*"

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