

August 25, 2019
 Community Mennonite Church of Lancaster
 Susan Gascho-Cooke
 “Storm Sunday”
 Luke 8:22-25
 Job 38:1-18

Storm may seem like an odd theme for a creation-themed Sunday. Although I can’t say that I’ve spent a lot of time over the years thinking about storms, or weather, really, in theological terms, I could immediately think of scriptures where characters engage with storms (two of which we just read this morning). Storms do feel like a timely metaphor given the *actual* weather disruptions we are experiencing and reading forecasts about.

I heard many tornado stories from my dad, who grew up in rural Nebraska: how seriously they took the sirens, the running to the shelters and basements. But in my imagination, it all just sounded exciting, because no one in my Dad’s family ever died or got carried away.

I confess I never really took east coast tornado warnings very seriously — I somehow thought that midwest tornadoes were the “real” tornadoes, and the ones out east were just wannabes. But I learned the hard way that a tornado is a tornado is a tornado.

We were living in Atlanta, in the summer of 2007 or 8, and there were more tornado warnings than usual that year, because Atlanta isn’t usually a big tornado destination city. I had never been anywhere near an actual tornado, and these were “east coast” tornadoes, so I didn’t pay very close attention, I guess.

So one Saturday afternoon, Teman and I got in the car for a spontaneous trip to the movies. The sky did look a little murky, which I think we commented on as we entered the highway, but nothing alarming. Then, all of a sudden, ahead of us, things were moving sideways that should have been going downward. It looked like gravity had shifted, or a great magnet off to our right was pulling all un-anchored objects toward it.

When you’re going 60 mph on a highway, you cover ground pretty quickly, so in the blink of an eye we were in the middle of those winds. I was driving, and I remember squealing and hunching over the steering wheel as objects flew by us. Then, *CRACK!* Something hit the driver’s side window, and it shattered. Thankfully, whatever the object was that hit us, it didn’t continue through the window after impact. I was squealing even louder now, and trying to lean away from the window while driving. Teman was talking to me, probably very calmly and rationally, as he does, but I’ve never felt so vulnerable as I did that day, driving down the highway with no window between me and the flying debris. Luckily there was an exit right there, so we pulled off the highway and down to a light, and then just as quickly as it started, the wind died down. Hearts pounding, we pulled under the overpass and stopped.

From then on, when we heard a tornado warning, we made for the downstairs bathroom — the only room in the house with no windows. Me, Teman, our landlady, my two cats in crates and her three large dogs crowded in that little room. That in itself was a natural disaster, but I didn’t care — I was *so* happy to be there each time, dog breath, cat hiss, chaos and all.

I now respect the potential for destruction that a storm can bring, and I have a much greater respect for storm *warnings*, too. And when I read in the news about the likelihood that, due to climate change and global warming there will be more severe storms, and that their severity will increase, it does not sound like a joke to me.

In the words of the United States Geological Survey: “With increasing global surface temperatures the possibility of more droughts and increased intensity of storms will likely occur. As more water vapor is evaporated into the atmosphere it becomes fuel for more powerful storms

to develop. More heat in the atmosphere and warmer ocean surface temperatures can lead to increased wind speeds in tropical storms.”¹

By the accounting of the National Severe Storms Laboratory, already “worldwide, there are an estimated 16 million thunderstorms each year, and at any given moment, there are roughly 2,000 thunderstorms in progress. There are about 100,000 thunderstorms each year in the U.S. alone. About 10% of these reach severe levels.”² That’s already 10,000 severe storms a year, just in the United States alone.

In the insurance industry, such storms are legally referred to as “acts of God” — an “unpreventable and destructive event that is caused by nature.” The Judeo-Christian tradition has often agreed with that — seeing the intentional hand of God in acts of nature. You hear vestiges of it now when a natural disaster hits the United States. Some preachers will say that it is God punishing us for *something* <insert their pet issue of the day >.

In the passage we read from Job today, God was literally speaking in and through a storm to Job. “Who are you to question *me?!?*” the story says God demands of Job. “Everything powerful on this earth you can think of? Well, I made it, or thought of it, and I control and command it even now. So there, squishy mortal.”

If you imagine the book of Job as a rap battle (my husband Teman’s brilliant idea, not mine), between God and Job, with Job’s friends wedging in, this was God’s mic drop moment. With all this language of the power of nature and God’s domination over it, the debate was over.

God spoke in *Stormish* in other places in the Bible, too (at least, that’s how those ancient writers *present* God to be at work). In the story of Jonah, God caused a storm to come forth over the water. In the story of Noah, God caused a storm to reign over the earth. In the story of Abraham, he bickers with God over God’s supposed intention to rain fire and brimstone down upon whole cities.

When we come to the New Testament, we find today’s Gospel story in all three of the synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke. And in this story, we find that Jesus speaks *Stormish*, too. I guess it was a language spoken in the home growing up? But, as you can see in the dueling images on our bulletin cover, in the book of Job God speaks *through* a storm, whereas in the Gospels Jesus speaks *to* the storm, telling it to cease and desist.

It’s an interesting story — Jesus takes his disciples, many of whom were fishermen who had likely spent most of the waking hours of their life out on that “lake” (technically, the Sea of Galilee), so it must have been a doozy of a storm to cause this particular boatload of people to fear for their lives. And the Sea of Galilee was/is a relatively shallow body of water, surrounded by high hills, all of which is apparently quite a recipe for storms, not only for frequent storms, but for storms to form quickly, and with little warning. So again, if this was the reality of this body of water, and the boat was full of fisherman who knew it like the back of their hands, this must have been a doozy of a storm.

Still it seems odd that Jesus would chide these men for lack of faith. It seems to me that only a great fool would not be afraid if their boat was filling with water out in the middle of a lake in a bad storm. Which leads one to wonder, as one always should when reading a story: why was this story included? what was the intended moral of the story, from the point of view of the writer? The story ends with the disciples seemingly coming to an awareness of the divinity of Jesus — and seems to want to remind readers of the Old Testament view of divinity as Storm King. “If he can command the winds and the water, who is he?” God, of course.

One commentator even speculated that Mark (whose version was likely cribbed and then embellished by Matthew and Luke) stole a story from Homer’s *Odyssey*, and ascribed it to Jesus, to

help underline Jesus' divine identity, and to give it a familiar sound to Gentile readers, who might hear echos of a story about Greek gods.³

"Odysseus," you may remember, "was on a journey struggling to get home to his wife and became lost at sea before he and his crew landed on the island of Aeolia. After a month on the island, enjoying the hospitality of [the god] Aeolus, the god kindly offered to assist Odysseus and his men to their destination by confining all of the adverse winds into a bag, and sending out the favorable soft wind of the west to push them safely toward home." It worked, and they had lovely weather on the journey home. But Odysseus' crew became curious about the contents of the bag from the god, Aeolus — was it really full of winds? How could it be? More likely it was a treasure of gold, and Odysseus was hoarding it! So, one night, when they were already in view of home, "while Odysseus slept, they opened [the bag] and released all the uncontrollable winds." The winds formed a powerful storm, "which carried the ship right back to Aeolia Island." Aeolus was not impressed with their faith in him.⁴

The parallel seems like a bit of a stretch to me — it's certainly not a line by line match. But you do have a boat full of men, with a sea that has been made calm by a god, and the lack of faith of the men almost dooms them. Acknowledgement that a being who can control the winds and waves must be a god, or must be divine, figures in both stories prominently.

What interests me is the human nature in this story — how quickly the crew of the boat forgets what it was like to sail in fear of a storm. Once the god removed the possibility of storm, though, it did not make them *more* trusting. It actually made them less trusting, and they soon forgot that divine intervention had anything to do with their good fortune. So, they released the bag of winds ...

If Mark was drawing on this story, he certainly made some welcome changes to it before it wound up in our scripture. But I wonder about the human factor in the Mark story, and the human factor now, as well. How quickly did the disciples forget that Jesus had calmed the storm?

One of our country's most famous storm stories, is the decade of devastating dust storms that decimated areas of Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas in the 1930s. The Dust Bowl years.

One account read: "Winds whipped across the plains, raising billowing clouds of dust. The sky could darken for days, and even well-sealed homes could have a thick layer of dust on the furniture. In some places, the dust drifted like snow, covering farm buildings and houses."⁵ Thousands of families simply abandoned their homes to flee the area simply to survive.

What caused this? The Depression didn't help. Add to that the fact that many of the farmers were white "settlers" invited by the government to take over Native American prairie lands that they had no idea how to farm. Most of them simply assumed that the same farming techniques that worked in the east could be copied and pasted with similar success in the west. "Due to low crop prices and high machinery costs [in the years leading up to the Dust Bowl years], more submarginal lands were put into production. Farmers also started to abandon soil conservation practices. These events laid the groundwork for the aeolian [wind] processes (note the reference to Aeolus of the *Odyssey* story here!) that led to the severe soil erosion that would cause the Dust Bowl." Then in 1931, began "the first of four major drought episodes that would occur over the course of the next decade."⁶

It's frustrating to hear how much human ignorance and human short-sightedness contributed to this "natural disaster." But here's what really grabbed me: "Another drawback was that with the return of the rains, many people soon forgot about conservation programs and measures implemented during the 1930s droughts. This led to a return to some of the inappropriate farming and grazing practices that made many regions so vulnerable to drought in the 1930s."⁷

It makes me wonder about the wisdom of calming the storm for us. If I was one of the disciples in that boat, I'm sure I'd be grateful for Jesus' rebuking of the storm. But I think of the storms around us right now — the tornadoes and hurricanes that we hear of with more frequency and severity. I think of the Amazon, burning, for some of the same reasons, it seems to me, as the heartland of the U.S. did in the Dust Bowl years. And I wonder, will we ever change our ways if God keeps putting out the little storms, the individual storms that we heap our "thoughts and prayers" on?

If they contain the fires in Brazil, will we keep eating the meat that demands that rain forests be turned into ranches? If the weather is unseasonably cool for a day (like yesterday here) will we be lulled into thinking it's not an emergency yet? Maybe our prayers shouldn't be for the storms to cease, but prayers that we *learn from* the storms, and not forget. Maybe we should pray that the storms keep us awake and bailing water.

As a recent report from the United Nations Human Rights Council stated:

If our global climate change catastrophe continues unchecked, vast swaths of the world will likely become harsher and far less hospitable for humanity. When that happens, an even greater rift will appear between the global haves and have-nots, as many people will be left without the means to escape the worst effects of the climate crisis: ... an impending climate apartheid.

While the rich hire private firefighters or move to more expensive habitable areas, the report predicts that 120 million people will be pushed into poverty by 2030 by climate change. Many more will die.

The report describes how the poorest 3.5 billion people in the world are responsible for ten percent of the world's greenhouse gas emissions, while the richest ten percent of the global population is responsible for half.

Perversely, the richest, who have the greatest capacity to adapt and are responsible for and have benefitted from the vast majority of greenhouse gas emissions, will be the best placed to cope with climate change, while the poorest, who have contributed the least to emissions and have the least capacity to react, will be the most harmed.

In the report, Alston writes how the wealthy's access to lifesaving resources has caused humanity to adapt to the climate crisis in the wrong direction — instead of acting to prevent or reverse the worst of climate change, the rich can afford to personally avoid the problem.

An over-reliance on the private sector could lead to a climate apartheid scenario in which the wealthy pay to escape overheating, hunger, and conflict, while the rest of the world is left to suffer.⁸

In other words, miracles are great. You, individually, being saved from a storm is, obviously, great. But we must be thinking not just of our own escape from peril, but of all boats out at sea.

Finally, after that depressing interlude about climate apartheid, here's a joke: why did Jesus and the disciples cross the lake?

You guessed it: To get to the other side.

That might sound simple and stupid, but it was actually a helpful reminder for me. It can sound like the story, and the storm, were somehow just a set-up for Jesus to perform his divinity — as if God's power is an end in and of itself. As if the only mark of human faithfulness is obsequious acknowledgement of divinity. Whether or not that was Mark's intent, that's not who I understand God to be — and it's certainly not the God I see the bulk Jesus' life and teachings pointing to.

What was on the other side of the lake was the country of Gerasenes — a “foreign” and “gentile” land, from the point of view of the disciples in the boat. It was here that the story actually ends, because this is why they got in the boat in the first place: to get to the other side. So, the very next verses in the synoptics after this story, have Jesus and the disciples disembarking on the shore of the Gerasenes, and Jesus goes on to exorcise the demon, “Legion,” there. He released Legion into a herd of pigs who would then plunge to their deaths into the very sea he had just calmed.

Some say this was a thinly-veiled political act of Jesus: to name a demon “Legion,” and cast it out into a herd of swine, because “Legion” was a Roman military term, and they were currently under Roman occupation. That’s a whole ‘nother sermon of its own, but it’s a reminder that Jesus didn’t pull them out into that boat as a set-up for divine self-congratulation, nor was the calming of the storm a way of shutting them up, or deceiving them into thinking storms aren’t really something to worry about

Jesus calmed that storm so they could get to the other side, which required calming their fear. The disciples were so scared during the storm they thought they would die. And yet after the storm, the disciples (these experienced fishermen and sailors) were, if you literally interpret the Greek in Mark: “terrified of being so terrified.” They were terrified of the storm, and then terrified after it, too.

We can fear the storm, and fear the miracle.

But we still need to get to the other side. We need to not make life about the calming of our fears, but about getting beyond ourselves. The point is reaching one another across the stormy seas, leaving the familiar to sail to the other shore where healing and transformation may await. Engaging and casting out “Legion” wherever we find it in our world today.

May we be grateful for the ways Jesus calms our storms, but may we use that calm and security to assure ourselves enough that we refuse to give up, that we re-commit to keep striving for the other side rather than stop at being grateful that our storm is over.

¹ “How Can Climate Change Affect Natural Disasters?” United States Geological Survey. https://www.usgs.gov/faqs/how-can-climate-change-affect-natural-disasters-1?qt-news_science_products=0#qt-news_science_products

² “Severe Weather 101.” National Severe Storms Laboratory. <https://www.nssl.noaa.gov/education/svrwx101/thunderstorms/>

³ Douglas W. Geyer, “Homer or Not Homer? Mark 4:35-41 in Recent Study.” From a paper read at the October 14, 2000 meeting of the Chicago Society for Biblical Research. <http://www.ibiblio.org/GMark/afr/HomerorNotHomer.htm>

⁴ “Aeolus – Greek God and Keeper of the Winds.” <https://mythology.net/greek/greek-gods/aeolus/>

⁵ <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/timeline/depwwii/dustbowl/>

⁶ National Drought Mitigation Center, University of Nebraska, <https://drought.unl.edu/dustbowl/Home.aspx>

⁷ National Drought Mitigation Center, University of Nebraska, <https://drought.unl.edu/dustbowl/Home.aspx>

⁸ <https://futurism.com/climate-apartheid-rich-survive>. The direct link to the June 6, 2019 Report from the United Nations Human Rights Council is here: https://srpovertyorg.files.wordpress.com/2019/06/unsr-poverty-climate-change-a_hrc_41_39.pdf