

The Very Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

WHEN GOD REBUKES

Sermon for Pentecost 4B—Job 38:1-11, Mk 4:35-41

LPC, 6/21/15

Adapted from a Homily originally preached at Buck Mt. Church, Earlysville, VA 6/22/97

Now, here is an instance where the compilers of the Revised Standard Lectionary knew what they were doing. Here we are at the beginning of the hot weather when a nice swim seems like a good idea on a Sunday morning, and they present us with all of this watery literature. From the psalmist's description of peril at sea, to the soaring poetry of God's creating the oceans in Job, to Jesus' calming the storm, we find ourselves aswim this week.

The story from the Gospel of Mark describes the vulnerability of the disciples' boat on the Sea of Galilee in a windstorm. My identification with this story dates back a couple of decades when my family went canoeing on Squam Lake, New Hampshire, one breezy day. We had rowed out to Moon Island, a distance of a couple of miles over mostly open water, for a swim and a picnic, but on our trip back the wind picked up. Our bodies, sticking high up out of the canoes (this is before we saw the error of our ways and picked up kayaking,) acted like sails, deflecting us from our destination.

The waves pushed us backward, and broke over the gunwales so that we took on water. It was like canoeing upstream in rapids. We paddled as fast as we could and seemed to make no headway. The muscles in our arms ached until we thought we could paddle no more, but stopping would have placed us at the total mercy of the wind, which was blowing in the wrong direction, so we continued past the point of exhaustion. Desperately, I prayed, "please...please...please..." corresponding to my oar stroke. Imperceptibly at first, we began finally to make progress. After much tacking, we made it back to our starting point.

The disciples' prayer to Jesus asleep in the back of the boat has the same air of desperation as my own on that occasion: "Do you not care that we are perishing?" This story has become so familiar that what is shocking to us today is not so much that Jesus stilled the storm, but that his words to the disciples are more like a rebuke than a comfort: "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

God's reply to Job in today's Old Testament reading has the same tone of rebuke: "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements – surely you know!" and so on. If you know the context, you know that Job has been suffering unspeakably, from the loss of his fortune, to the death of *all* his children, to his affliction with sores all over his body. Surely if anyone needs a comforting word, it is Job. If we read ahead four chapters we know that God restores Job's fortunes, but God's tone at the moment seems somewhat harsh.

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How we want a tame, gentle God: a God who grants our prayers and wishes like a divine fairy godmother, or as one writer has put it, “a cosmic bellhop.” The truth is, Jesus is always upsetting things. C.S. Lewis’ symbol for Christ in his Narnia books is a powerful wild animal, a lion named Aslan. When the children in the books first hear about Aslan they are strangely thrilled. “A lion!” they exclaim, “Is he safe?” “Of course he isn’t safe!” they are told, “He’s a lion!”

Considering who God is, and considering who we are, it shouldn’t be any surprise when God answers our prayers in a different manner than the one we expect.

In his book *A New Life*, writer Reynolds Price recounts the searing story of his diagnosis of a brain tumor and his resulting paralysis. After months of pain and treatment with no apparent progress, Price in desperation cries to God asking how much he must bear. He gets a one-word answer: “*More.*”

Sometimes the answer to prayer is not just something we would rather not hear. Sometimes the answer to prayer seems to be God’s silence. Father Thomas Keating, in his book, *Crisis of Faith, Crisis of Love* takes up some difficult gospel passages where Jesus seems to delay responding, or responds harshly, to people who come to him in need. Keating says that these apparent rebuffs are part of Jesus’ plan to draw a person to new heights of faith by weaning him or her from dependency on the comforts God offers, and by the cultivation of humility, “The habit of waiting for God,” he says, “gradually establishes us in a right attitude towards him. We cannot push God around. But that is what we try to do when we say, ‘Give me this; give me that.’ Or even, ‘Please give me this.’”

When you think about it, why should we expect God to respond as we want to our prayers? Do we know better than he does? What kind of God do we believe in anyway? If God did only what we ask, how wise could God be? No wiser than we! If God were wholly concerned only with our own individual interests, how could God bring about the ultimate salvation of the whole world? How could God respond to our intercessory prayers? If God said yes all the time, where would be the love in that? How could God lead us to new heights of faith?

Don’t get me wrong. Our prayers of desperation are true prayers, coming as they do straight from the heart. Honesty requires that we lay our desires and concerns before God. But God asks more than honesty. He also asks faith and humility. In humility we recognize that we may not always know best. In faith we trust that God does.

When it seems to us that we are getting the “wrong” answer, or no answer at all to prayer, we tend to assume that God does not listen. But we’re in good company. Remember when Jesus himself prayed, “Let this cup pass,” the answer was no.

God does listen, and he does answer. The eventual and inevitable result will be the kingdom of God, and Good News! God wants us to be part of it.