

God With Us

May 22, 2018 White Lick Presbyterian

“In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.”

The opening words of the Bible talk about the power and wonder of God – the Creator. In that first creation story, in Genesis 1, there’s an interesting concept of what the world was like before God started the work of creation. In spite of what we usually think, Genesis does NOT give us a picture of God creating the world out of nothing. Rather, the world before creation is pictured as a deep, dark, and chaotic sea – a formless void. Turbulent waters . . . mysterious depths . . . fearful disarray . . . darkness . . . a lifeless, churning, emptiness. And then God SPEAKS, and we see the ordering and transformation of the universe.

When we think about the creation story, it gives us a couple of important theological concepts. First of all, it tells us of the power of God and the nature of God. There’s a God so powerful that simply by God’s Word things happen! God just says, “Let there be light” and suddenly there IS light” and the darkness is no longer a threat. God says: “Let there be a dome separating the waters” and the earth becomes a habitable place. So we have this idea, this image of God, as a God of awesome power and authority. But there’s another idea that goes hand-in-hand with the first, and that is that this same God who created the world, is STILL creating; still in control of the universe. The chaos is still out there; and threatens to overwhelm us if it were not for the continuing presence and power of God.

The Biblical story returns time and gain to this theme. We see it in the narratives of our religious history. There are times of great calm, when peace prevailed and God seemed very close; But we also see times of great struggle; times of personal and national pain; Times when it seems as if the hand of God has been withdrawn and the waters of chaos seem to pour in and overwhelm.

In both good times and bad the people looked for the hand of God and they tried to make sense of everything that life threw at them. And we

understand their struggle because you and I face the same issues in our own time! How do WE deal with the problems; the challenges we face in our lives? How do we theologize -- how do we make SENSE of cancer; or heart disease; or the sudden death of someone we love? How do we deal with war, and blind hatred and prejudice?

How do we settle the conflicts which exist even within the Church? Or CAN we? Should we EXPECT to be able to settle all our differences?

Our scripture lessons this morning do not answer all these questions – because, quite frankly, there are no simple answers. But while the lessons do not give us an answer, they POINT us in the right direction as we LOOK for answers – or at least for comfort. So let’s look first at the lesson from 2 Corinthians 6:1-13, and notice, as we read, just how HARD it was to be a Christian in the first century.

As God’s co-workers we urge you not to receive God’s grace in vain. For he says, “In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.” I tell you, now is the time of God’s favor, now is the day of salvation. We put no stumbling block in anyone’s path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything. We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us. As a fair exchange—I speak as to my children —open wide your hearts also.

When we think about those first Christians, the ones who had first-hand knowledge of Jesus; or the ones who came to faith through the preaching of the Apostles – we tend to think that they had a purity of faith that the modern church lacks. We think about how much EASIER it would be to

believe, in that more SIMPLE time. But the REALITY of Paul's letters describe a very different scene. What we don't think about is this fact -- The letters that Paul wrote to the various churches were, for the most part, written to help those Christians settle some conflict or another.

The early church had a boatload of disagreement. They disagreed about matters of faith. They disagreed about their understanding of Christ: was he a human being or a God? They fought about who should be included in the church and who should not! What about the Gentiles? What about those who were ritually unclean? Does someone have to become a Jew before he or she could become a Christian? What about all those Old Testament laws-- are they still in effect? How do we treat women? How do we deal with slaves? What's our relationship with the government? What do we do when Caesar, when the Government wants us to do one thing and Christ demands something else? And, within the early Christian church there was tremendous disagreement on every one of those questions.

Paul's letters, and the early church councils, were efforts to resolve the major conflicts within the church. In recent years there's been a lot of news about the discovery of ancient Gnostic writings, like the Gospel of Judas, and the Gospel of Thomas. We've become more aware of what scholars have always known -- that there was a lot of variety in the beliefs of the early church. Over time there were winners and losers in the struggle for orthodoxy as the Christian faith developed. And, I believe that God had a hand in that whole process; but that doesn't change the fact that through ALL of history people have struggled to understand God's truth, and Christians, of good conscience, have disagreed. And those who have sought to be faithful to Jesus Christ, have found themselves at odds with the world around them.

Friends: It's not EASY to be a Christian -- and it NEVER WAS! To borrow from the Staples commercial -- there is no EASY button that solves all our problems. And so the Church has always looked for comfort and strength amid the chaos of the world around us. We ALWAYS looked for peace amid the chaos all around us. With that in mind, let's turn to our gospel lesson from Mark, chapter 4. The lesson comes fairly early in the ministry of Jesus. He's just recruited his disciples -- the twelve who would be closest to him -- and has begun his preaching ministry. Large crowds are gathering around

him, and pressing in on him so relentlessly, that Mark tells us he couldn't even find the time to eat. His family is worried about Jesus, and his mother and brothers try to intervene – they try to help him. In Mark we see a very human Jesus, and right now we see an exhausted Jesus. Some of his closest friends and family members, seem to be concerned for his sanity – he is so driven! In our lesson, after a long day of preaching and teaching Jesus decides to cross over the lake to the other side, perhaps to escape the crowd for a few hours of rest. Listen, as Mark tells the story.

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 windstorm 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?"

The disciples took Jesus in the boat “just as he was.” What do you suppose Mark means by that statement: “just as he was?” It’s a rather ODD thing to say about Jesus. They took him in the boat “just as he was.”

When Matthew and Luke write their gospels, they used Mark as one of their sources, but they both delete that phrase. Just How WAS Jesus that night? The other gospel writers often modify Mark, particularly when Mark shows the humanity of Jesus – or the emotions of Jesus. They are more concerned with emphasizing his divinity. In this story we see the picture of an exhausted Jesus; a tired Jesus; an emotionally spent Jesus; a person so wiped out he can sleep through a raging storm. And why can he sleep? The story actually gives us TWO reasons.

Jesus can sleep because he's physically and emotionally exhausted; but, also . . . He can sleep because he is CONFIDENT in the power of God.

In a lot of ways, this story of the calming of the storm, is almost a parable.

In fact, some scholars argue that some of the stories we have in the gospels may actually be parables that the early church told about Jesus. Jesus and his disciples are in the boat. (Mark tells us that there were other boats also, sort of a convoy crossing the Lake. Matthew and Luke, remove the other boats from their telling of the story). In either case, in the middle of the night a storm comes up, and the wind and waves turn ugly. The Lake of Galilee does that – it is a dangerous body of water. The disciples of Jesus (and the other boats) are all filled with experienced fishermen who have spent their lives on the water, yet even they are still frightened. And it's here that we can reflect back to Genesis and that concept of the world. The turbulent, chaotic sea, is always a frightening place. But in their theology – in their concept of the universe – and in OUR understanding of the universe, it is God who holds it all together. God holds back the forces of chaos. The boat begins to take on water, but Jesus is sound asleep in the stern. He's unconscious, until the terrified disciples wake him up! "Teacher," they said, "don't you care that we are perishing?"

Now, it's interesting to think about what they say, but ALSO . . . what they DON'T say. Do the disciples really expect Jesus to do anything about this situation? Are they waking him up so he can calm the storm? Or, are they just waking him up so he can be with them as they all die? The text is not clear, but it almost seems more like the later than the former, because they are so amazed by what happens next.

Waking up, Jesus says to the wind and to the sea: "Peace! Be still!" And suddenly, there's a dead calm.. And then, these recently recruited disciples start looking at each other in stunned amazement. You can almost imagine them asking themselves: "O my goodness... Oh my God... What have we gotten ourselves into here?" "Who IS this guy?" they ask. "Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" Who IS this? And, because WE know Genesis (and because THEY knew Genesis also) we ALL know the answer to that question? WHO is it that commands the wind and the sea? WHO is it that just speaks and the waves obey? WHO, just by speaking the Word, makes things happen? WHO has that kind of power and authority? There's only One! Only ONE answer! Only ONE who wields that power!

Now, this story (or this parable if you prefer) became a very important story for the early church. In all the struggles they faced, in the chaos and

persecutions of their day, it was essential that they remember who it is that's ultimately in charge of this world. Think about Paul, with all his "afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors and sleepless nights." What would this story of the calming of the sea mean to him? Think about those early churches with all their theological struggles and all the hot button issues of their day.

What would this story mean to them? (And remember, that the BOAT was a very early symbol of the Christian church!) Think about First Presbyterian Church, as you deal with all the challenges of witnessing to Jesus Christ in this community; and in this ever-changing world. What does this story tell you about the PRESENCE and POWER of God to guide and protect you? That boat we call the church is still tossed about on rough seas, and we, the disciples in our day, are sometimes terrified. But all the time, Jesus is peacefully sleeping in the stern, And as long as Christ is on board there's no reason to fear. The same is true in our personal lives; in the struggles you and I face from day to day. We are NOT alone. Remember that God is the one who created this world, and everything in it. Remember that! And trust that you are safe. You are secure in the Love of God. "Why are you afraid?" Jesus asks. "Peace!" "Be Still!" "Relax already... I am WITH you."