

Life on a Wild, Restless Sea?

Thoughts on “Stilling the Storms” have been on my mind quite a bit this summer. There were sermons and services on “Jesus stilling the storm”. There were books I read, stories people shared...stories of serious personal storms in their lives, fears which came up, breathless anxiety, and the deep, deep longing for peace.

Mark 4: 35-41

³⁵ On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.”³⁶ And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him.³⁷ A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped.³⁸ 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?”³⁹ 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.⁴⁰ He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”⁴¹ 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?”

Whether it is a family conflict, a sudden illness, a disaster like this Corona crisis we are facing in the whole world, we sometimes find ourselves asking, “God, don’t you care?” Imagine yourself on this life-threatening voyage. You’ve bailed water for hours. Your legs are bruised from being banged about the boat by the heaving waves. You are cold, wet, and bone-weary. With a hoarse voice you ask, “Teacher, do you not care...?”

What about this passage touches you most? That Jesus could control an uncontrollable force? That Jesus was surprised by their fear? That the disciples expected Jesus to intervene but then, when he did, were astounded that he could help?

What does this passage say to us about the mystery of God’s presence in seemingly uncontrollable circumstances?

The Bible has various stories of the sea as a place of trial and uncertainty, a dangerous place. In the story from Mark’s gospel Jesus orders his disciples to cross the Sea of Galilee. Soon the sea, once blue and beautiful, turns troubled, stormy, dangerous, and uncertain. As the disciples battle the waves, Jesus sleeps. And when they call him in despair and fear, he awakes and rebukes the wind and the waves.

There is a well-known old hymn. “Jesus calls us; o’er the tumult of our life’s wild, restless sea, day by day his clear voice soundeth, saying ‘Christian, follow me.’”

Maybe you know the hymn?

Some years ago, an old American colleague of mine who I met at a gathering of people leading international churches, said he’d like to sing “Jesus calls us; **to** the tumult of our life’s wild, restless sea...”. Because he believed that Jesus calls us not just o’er our life’s wild and restless sea, but straight into the middle of that restless, terrifying sea. She said, she believed that Jesus calls us to serve in the midst of the storm.

I was impressed. Had I been waiting for the stilling of storms, had I hoped for peace and quiet for so long and so often in my life, I then understood that the storm would not necessarily go away, but that Jesus calls me to live and cope in the storm.

Jesus calls his followers into the midst of the raging sea which our world often is, to bring about God’s plan and purpose for the world. And more than ever before, in this times of Covid-19, we have to listen carefully to God’s voice, learn new things daily, be flexible, patient, and over all confident that at some point all will be good again...

Great windstorms, waves beating into the boat... aren't these haunting images of our world? I can see them.

I can see them in conflicts all over the place. I can see them in the growing racism in too many places. I can see them in the unceasing terrorism. I can see them in diagnoses that threaten us and make the ground under our feet shake. I can see them in fatal diseases, in the climate change, in the divisions that go through nations, political parties, and churches. I can see them in the injustice of our immigration policy and practices. I can see them in the people living without access to affordable health care, in people who lack adequate housing and education, in children still living in disgraceful poverty.

"The mission of the church that would follow in the way of Jesus will always be headquartered at sea", writes Michael B. Curry and calls us out to live bravely in the storms of our time.

Not a comfortable image of the life, Christians live. But we are not living in comfortable times either. These are not easy days for our world.

Sometimes it is hard to know what decision to make, which way to go. But we will not give up. We will not grow weary, even in the midst of the storm. We will not be among those who shrink and fall back, as the Bible says.

God has made us, all the people of the world, into one family. And as sisters and brothers in Christ, we will need God's summons for us to witness to the gospel of God's compassion, justice, and love, even in the midst of the wild sea.

In a world so torn apart by
rivalry, anger, and hatred,
we have the privileged vocation
to be living signs of a love
that can bridge all divisions
and heal all wounds. Henri Nouwen