

Sermon: Year B, Proper 7

Job 38:1-11

II Corinthians 6:1-13

Mark 4:35-41

A few years ago, Bruce Springsteen recorded a song quite unlike his usual fare. It wasn't about New Jersey or the nostalgia of glory days or any of the travails and triumphs of romance. It was rather a simple meditation on Christ's passion. And he was very direct, envisioning Jesus being led to Golgotha, with all the noise of the surrounding, shouting masses removed. He sang of the loneliness shared by a mother and her son moving toward what they could not stop: this alone. The lyrics are both stark and intimate: he sang, "Jesus was an only son as he walked up Calvary hill, his mother Mary walking beside him in the path where his blood spilled." This short introduction is followed quickly by Springsteen's juxtaposition of the prayers he imagines that each of them offered. Of Mary he sings: "A mother prays, 'Sleep tight, my child, sleep well for I'll be at your side, that no shadow, no darkness, no tolling bell, shall pierce your dreams this night.' And for Jesus, he keeps close to the Biblical text: "In the Garden of Gethsemane he prayed for the life he'd never live. He beseeched his heavenly Father to remove the cup of death from his lips." And then, just as quickly, these expressions reach their conclusion, not in another petition but in a surprising sense of trust and confidence. The song ends with this soft but re-echoing verse: "Well, Jesus kissed his mother's hands, whispered, 'Mother, still your tears, for remember the soul of the universe willed a world and it appeared.'"

It's often tempting in our time to try to make Christianity seem more relevant by reference to pop culture idols, as if they set the standard for what is current enough to deserve our attention. And, yes, I'm fully aware that by this time Springsteen himself is on the very outer edge of the demographic of those count. But this is not why I have quoted him. I don't really care if Springsteen himself is relevant or not. What matters is that in so short a song he showed that he understands Jesus better than the disciples themselves did, and in a way that is very important in light of the Gospel read this morning.

The story from Mark is simple too. Jesus and his disciples are out on the sea of Galilee and a storm arises, severe enough to threaten their survival. The disciples cry out, and Jesus, who had been sleeping, stills the waters. This is the action of the story, which is then met by two strikingly different responses. Jesus wonders aloud why the disciples were afraid; the disciples are astounded by Jesus' seeming power to control even the winds and seas. And what we often fail to recognize in this text is the dramatic contrast between these two reactions. They point in opposite directions, and how we choose to read them, giving prominence to one over the other, significantly determines what this story means for the nature of faith.

The chief focus of the disciples is Jesus and what he has done, and since their astonishment ends the story, it's easy for us to share the same perspective. Here is someone who can do miraculous things. The waters are calmed. What else can he do? If the elements obey him, then there's probably nothing that's impossible. This is better than hitting the lottery. With Jesus on our side, everything can be turned toward our own favor – and faith is merely the question of whether we believe this strongly enough to warrant such miracles for ourselves. Or so it is often hoped. Prayers are said. Petitions offered. Pleas are made for divine intervention, especially when we

feel threatened or afraid. Jesus can make things right. And Jesus will do this if only... if only what?

This is the problem we're left with. What indeed is required of us for Jesus to hear and respond. If the moral of the story is that miracles can happen at his command, then how do we earn his favor? Or conversely, if we don't see miracles occurring with regularity, if we pray for even small things, and they do not come, then why should we believe this story. It risks becoming fanciful – a mere fable.

But this is where Jesus' own response within the story becomes key. For he didn't point to himself. He didn't seem all that interested in the condition of the seas either. In point of fact, what he did seems irrelevant to him. Jesus merely asked the disciples why they were panicked in the first place. He had been asleep. He wasn't worried. And his calm didn't stem from his own power to control the situation. His calm was grounded, rather, in a confidence that didn't depend on variable circumstances. His life was in God's hands. The world is under God's care. All that has come into being has been the work of God, and all God's work is subject to God's salvation. So what is there to fear? It's the singular trust of Jesus' own reaction here that we tend to miss. We're so intent on smaller and more immediate things. We're so centered on our own moment that we completely miss the beauty of God's infinite passion. The disciples were looking for a miracle, but Jesus lived and breathed the conviction that God never leaves, so we need not be afraid. Salvation precedes creation itself, so in place of fear we may live in the freedom of rejoicing.

It is this very same difference that is displayed once more at the crucifixion itself. Jesus is mocked by those watching. They insist that if he is truly the son of God, then he would be able to save himself from death. But again, this is neither the way of God nor the substance of faith. The deeper trust is that death is neither our end nor our abandonment by God. For the God who created is the God who redeems, and greater than miracles is the ability to see God in the whole movement of time and events, and so keenly, that all our anxiety is dispelled. There are still prayers to be offered and intercessions to be made, but they aren't requests for God to be present where God is not or active in a way that God has not yet acted. Our prayers serve, rather, to open to us the fuller and deeper relations of our lives that are already in place and are already at work. They disclose, or, most centrally, they remind us of the love that has begun and will culminate all of creation. Even in the face of extraordinary cruelty, prayer maintains that we are neither alone nor left to blind fate. Prayer keeps alive the possibility of intimacy and hope... and song: "Well, Jesus kissed his mother's hands, whispered, 'Mother, still your tears, remember the soul of the universe willed a world and it appeared.'"

The Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar was fond of repeating that Christianity's most radical claim was this: the Word became flesh. By this he was emphasizing that God's revelation is not a set of doctrines that, if followed, will eliminate our troubles and ensure our success and happiness. Nor is it a set of teachings that would better explain our world and make our paths easier. The Word did not become dogma or a ready solution for our ills. The Word became flesh, one of us, a human being, and thereby God revealed that his relationship with us is inviolable and indestructible. He descended into creation as a creature in order to declare that the soul of the universe would not forget or abandon any one along any path amid any circumstances. The real

miracle isn't God's supernatural intervention from time to time; it's God's full immersion in all our time, from beginning to end, so that we may live with the confidence that our lives, too, are secured by God's time.

Yet we are too much heirs of the disciples' misunderstanding.

I have watched with fascination this week the marches and protests erupting in Iran. It's mesmerizing to see what happens when fear is no longer a factor or a tool of repression, when a sense of freedom and integrity overwhelms a populace. So much hope arises. So much possibility is imagined. It entrances us, even if we aren't involved.

What Jesus said in the boat with his disciples, opens an even greater vision, not just of political gain but of eternal bearing. We are invited to an even more thrilling mode of living, which Paul so magnificently articulated. What would happen if we, as the church, actually took hold of this freedom and let it be known in the streets: in any and all circumstances, remember the soul of the universe willed a world and it appeared. Why are we afraid?

The Rev. Peter Vanderveen