

Facing the Storm with Questions

The worst fear became a nightmare. The newspapers and my family spoke of it. My brother's classmate and friend was gone. Three fourteen-year-old boys were camping and hiking. It was an expected adventure. No one knew exactly what happened. What everyone did know was they were on the bridge when the storm turned the river of life into a chaotic wave and three children were lost forever.

I was 8 and had no concept of loss, suffering and pain. I saw other people were sad. What forever changed me was witnessing communal grief.

It happened at church. The entire worship focused on the loss of Kevin, my brother's friend, and his companions. The whole community knew him and his family. The pastor led us going to God with our questions, our pain, and our confusion. When it was over a moment of simple beauty occurred.

I sat as a naïve second grader and watched as a line of 8th graders, thirteen and fourteen-year-olds, went to the pew where Kevin's parents sat. One by one 50 plus teenagers, confirmation students, 50 Amy's, Cara's, Zoey's, and Angel's hugged Kevin's parent. There were no answers. No miracles of peace and instant understanding. Only a silent, "I love you."

I remember as a child having zero understanding of the anguish. Now as an adult, a parent, and a Christian minister I have a vibrant imagination of the anger, grief, the questions, and demand for justice and answers. The memory alone makes me want to shake my fist at the sky and join Job in demanding office hours with the Creator. This makes me a disciple.

These questions bring us to our passage. The disciples, our fore bearers of faith, are on a typical boat ride across the sea. A third of them are experienced sailors who had seen more than most could imagine. Then the worst fear. A storm of awe inspiring proportions. The terror overtakes the mind and soul questioning all existence and sense of hope. The storm not only threatens to rip away life it attacks the relationships the disciples possess to lead them to wholeness.

It makes sense. Jesus is asleep. Who can sleep through a life-threatening storm? Who remains calm without questions when the bridge is swept away and human innocence and promise with it? Of course they would ask, "Teacher, do you not care?"

Correctly, scholars agree this is the point when fear monopolizes the disciples. How many times have we, have you and I, let our emotions of anger, confusion and grief remove our awareness? Scholars point out Jesus is in the boat. How foolish can the disciples be? If Jesus does not care about them then he has stopped caring about himself. Of course Jesus cares. That's why, nonchalantly, he wakes to miraculously quell the storm then to volley back the question, "Do you have no faith? Why are you so afraid?"

There are no easy answers to storms. We know they come. We know innocence is threatened. People flee unimaginable gang violence for the safety of their children and then have them ripped away because they are called criminals. We do everything we can to do right and still it all turns out strange at best, unspeakable at worst.

Congregational theologian Jonathan Edwards declared we are sinners in the hands of an angry God. The biblical narrative about storms and human suffering and our search for understanding proclaims we are finite beings in the hands of and on a journey created by an infinite being. We have been thrown into an epic, ancient mystery whose end is nowhere in clear sight. It was here long before us and will, God's will be done, be here long after us.

The scholars are right. Our faith teaches us we need to remember Jesus is in the boat with us. No matter how awful it has gotten the Divine found its way in to break the evil. What the scholars forgot to acknowledge was the enlightenment and relationship of questions.

Repeatedly throughout scripture it is the ones who ask questions, Job, the disciples, Moses, and even the Pharisees and party animal Corinthians, who get the answers. They ask questions. Yes, like in today's story the response is direct and almost lacking compassion. God famously told Job in so many words, "Who do you think you are and where have you been?" This was followed with an in depth explanation about God's power and the creation process. Enlightenment. Even Jesus asked, "Why have you forsaken me? Do I really have to do this? Thy will be done."

In this epic mystery we call life, our faith teaches us of God's yearning for relationship. No relationship is complete without questions and genuine dialogue. There is no sin in asking, "Where is justice? What does this mean?" What we learn today is to remember Jesus is in the boat with us. God moves among our broken lives and world.

The awareness of Divine power is subtle. It is teenagers knowing the power of hugs. It is a pastor voicing the grief of community. It is sitting without answers, with fear, terror, anxiety looming and silently being present. It is when there are no other options, reaching out to hold the hand of one who is stuck between this life and the mystery. Holding the hand to hear and proclaim, "I love you." Here today we join the disciples asking, "Who said I love you?"