

## *Turbulence as Context*

A Pentecost 3 Sermon

Mark 4:35-41

Sunday, June 21, 2009

by Dr. Frank Trotter

A young naval student was being put through the paces by an old sea-captain. The captain asked the young sailor, "What would you do if a sudden storm sprang up on the starboard?" The student said, "Throw out an anchor, sir." "And what would you do if another storm sprang up aft?" the old veteran asked. "Throw out another anchor, sir." "And if another terrific storm sprang up forward, what would you do?" The young man said firmly, "I would throw out another anchor, sir." The old sailor finally stopped and said, "Hold on, young man. Where are you getting all your anchors from?" The young sailor took a deep breath and said, "From the same place you're getting all of your storms, Sir."

We live in a time of storms and turbulence. Just as the hurricane season is beginning along the Gulf and Atlantic coasts in the southeastern states and just as the tornado season is not far off in the mid-America state, most of us have felt the effects of the economic storms that have swept much of the world over the past year. We know what it is to live in financial uncertainty, in wondering if we will ever regain the savings that were lost when the market collapsed last fall. All of us know someone who lost a job in California where the unemployment rate has reached over 11%. Many people who had thought about retiring have been forced to put those ideas on the shelf for the time being. The American automobile industry is in crisis. Among the American companies, only Ford is not in bankruptcy or on the edge of it. The newspaper industry is in jeopardy, and it's not alone.

On the international scene, there is great turmoil in Iran where the citizens are demanding freedom after a controversial election. In countries from Somalia, to the Sudan, to Iraq, to Palestine, people live in the midst of turbulence.

When we hear the story of a plane that comes apart during great stormy turbulence crossing the Atlantic, there is a part of us that recognizes the absolute fear that the passengers of Air France flight 447 must have experienced. They knew, in some profound way, that the length of their lifetimes had suddenly come into question.

One day, Jesus and the disciples get into a boat to cross the Sea of Galilee, a journey that they had taken many times, sometimes more than once a day. When a storm threatens to overwhelm the vessel, Jesus is sleeping in the rear of the boat. Biblical scholar Walter Wink says that the disciples “might have reproached him with, Don’t just lie there – bail! Instead they attack him personally: ‘Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?’ They personalize the storm, almost as if he has sent it against them spitefully. They address him not as another available hand in a crisis but as their teacher. They project on him concern for their well-being and survival, and are thus emptied of the inner resources to deal with the storm themselves—these weathered seamen!”<sup>1</sup>

Several of these disciples were seasoned sailors and had experienced storms on the Sea of Galilee many times. Where had their courage gone this time? Dr. Wink suggests that they suddenly became “co-dependent” with Jesus – “they had given up their courage by entering into dependency on [him].”<sup>2</sup> Instead of coping with the turbulence caused by the storm, using the skills that they had in abundance, they become petulant children who expect to be taken care of.

Dr. Wink says, “the wind ceases, and there is dead calm. Everywhere, that is, except the boat. Jesus demands, ‘Why were you such cowards [deiloi, cowardly, timid]? Have you still no faith?’ Faith in what? In him? No, they didn’t. They awoke him with reproaches, not the cry of believers for help. They also lacked faith in themselves. You deal with the storm. You are the seamen here. You had the resources, and you failed to call upon them. Exercise your own faith!”<sup>3</sup>

The story ends with them being amazed at his power, but we – as readers and hearers of the story – are uncertain if they have heard his message: To grow up and take care of the crisis using the competency which they had demonstrated every day on the Sea of Galilee, skills which they possessed in abundance.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Wink, “The Projector Is Running,” *The Christian Century*, June 1, 1994, [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1058/is\\_n18\\_v111/ai\\_15449864/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1058/is_n18_v111/ai_15449864/).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Theologian William Loader says that “the extraordinary image of Jesus commanding the elements has less to do with managing nature than it has to do with portraying the gospel as struggle against demonic and destructive powers. The gospel, according to Mark, is about Jesus coming to liberate people from such forces. It is to see Jesus as the embodiment of God’s power, the bearer of God’s Spirit, to challenge and overcome the deep and destructive powers which the furies of nature symbolized...”<sup>4</sup>

Professor Loader suggests that the context of our time is always turbulence, that there are always forces and powers which seem intent upon destroying the goodness of creation, the blessings of God, and the kingdom of heaven. None of us are ultimately immune to being tested.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist tradition, writes in his *Journal* of a great storm that came over the ship in which he was traveling from England to the American colonies. The storm was so fierce that most of the passengers, including Wesley, stayed in their cabins and clung desperately to their bunks. To the astonishment of almost everyone, a small group of German Christians known as Moravians calmly gathered as they did every day for daily worship and singing.

As Wesley watched these brave souls give thanks to God despite of the devastating turbulence of the storm, he looked within himself and admitted how impoverished his spiritual life truly was. What was it that they had that he did not? Simply put, an unfailing trust in Jesus Christ. If Jesus exposed the shallowness of the disciples’ faith in the storm on the Sea of Galilee, he did the same thing to John Wesley in the storm Wesley experienced while crossing the Atlantic Ocean.

Because of that exposure, Wesley began a painful but ultimately rewarding reassessment of all of the false assumptions he had made about the strength of his faith in God. Because of that storm and the witness of the Moravians, John Wesley eventually experienced a spiritual awakening on Aldersgate Street in London on May 24, 1738 when the strength of his faith moved into harmony with the strength of the Moravians.

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<sup>4</sup> William Loader, “First Thoughts on Gospel Passages from Year B Gospel Passages from the Lectionary: Pentecost 3,” <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MkPentecost3.htm>. Professor Loader is research professor at Murdoch University, Perth, Australia (Uniting Church in Australia); <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/home.html>.

Leonard Sweet says that “the miracle Jesus wanted to show [the disciples] was not the miracle of calming the storm but the miracle of calming them in the storm.”<sup>5</sup>

This was the faith those Moravian travelers showed to John Wesley -- the faith that knows with Jesus that there is no storm too fierce, no opponent too great, no crisis too complete. The disciples lost out on their chance to experience the jubilation, the sheer exhilaration that could have been theirs had they had the courage to ride the waves of that storm with Jesus. Instead, their timidity forced him to shut the ride down and sail them into port.

Five years ago, four British rowers were attempting to cross the Atlantic by rowing when a rogue wave suddenly appeared in the midst of a storm. It rose 60 feet, looming over them, and crashed down with such force that it split their boat in two. Somehow, all of them managed to find their way to the single life raft that somehow sprang free of the wreckage. Throughout the hours that they clung to that raft, it was the jokes and banter by one of them that kept them from giving up.<sup>6</sup> While there are many stories of how survivors of sinking ships give up after a certain amount of time, these men did not because they somehow conquered their fear and could see beyond the storm. Finally, a Danish cargo ship that had picked up their distress signal found them and lifted them out of the sea to safety.

Saint Theresa of Ávila, a sixteenth century Spanish mystic, wrote:

Nada te turbe,	(Let nothing disturb you,)
Nada te espante,	(Nothing frighten you,)
Todo se pasa,	(All is passing,)
Dios no se muda,	(God does not change,)
La paciencia	(Patience)
Todo lo alcanza;	(Attains to all;)
Quien a Dios tiene	(One who holds to God)
Nada le falta:	(Lacks nothing)
Solo Dios basta. <sup>7</sup>	(God alone is enough.)

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<sup>5</sup> Leonard I. Sweet, *Quantum Spirituality: A Postmodern Apologetic* (Dayton, Ohio: WhalePrints Publishers, 1991), 165.

<sup>6</sup> “Jokes saved rowers caught in Atlantic storm,” August 9, 2004, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/1469010/Jokes-saved-rowers-caught-in-Atlantic-storm.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Saint Theresa of Ávila, translated by John S. Dunne in *The Homing Spirit* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 80.

John Bunyan, the author of *A Pilgrim's Progress*, one of the classics of Christian literature, asked: "Do not even such things as are most bitter to the flesh, tend to awaken Christians to faith and prayer, to a sight of the emptiness of this world, and the fadingness of the best it yield? Doth not God by these things (ofttimes) call our sins to remembrance, and provoke us to amendment of life? How then can we be offended at things by which we reap so much good?"<sup>8</sup>

William Cowper, a well-known Englishman who wrote hymns during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, often struggled with depression and doubt throughout his lifetime. One night he decided to commit suicide by drowning himself in the Thames River. He called a cab and told the driver to take him to the river bank. However, within moments of getting into the cab, Cowper noticed that a thick fog was coming down that eventually prevented the cabby from finding the Thames. After driving around lost for a while, the cabby finally stopped and let Cowper out...where, to his surprise, he found himself on his own doorstep! Cowper later came to believe that God had sent the fog to keep him from killing himself, that even in our blackest moments, God watches over us.

Cowper would later write these words for a hymn that are among his most well-known:

God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform.  
He plants His footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm.<sup>9</sup>

Dr. Robert Schuler, the pastor and founder of the Crystal Cathedral in Anaheim, says, "Never cut a tree down in the wintertime. Never make a negative decision in the low time. Never make your most important decisions when you are in your worst moods. Wait. Be patient. The storm will pass. The spring will come."

One of the hymns that I learned to play on the organ at my father's church when I was in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade is "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms." It's a

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<sup>8</sup> John Bunyan, "Seasonable Counsel; or, Advice to Sufferers", 1684,  
<http://www.mountzion.org/johnbunyan/text/bun-suffer.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> William Cowper, "God Moves in a Mysterious Way,"  
[http://www.scriptureandmusic.com/Music/Text\\_Files/God\\_Moves\\_In\\_A\\_Mysterious\\_Way.html](http://www.scriptureandmusic.com/Music/Text_Files/God_Moves_In_A_Mysterious_Way.html).

great hymn of faith and the third verse has so much resonance with the theme of today's sermon:

What have I to dread, what have I to fear,  
leaning on the everlasting arms?  
I have blessed peace with my Lord so dear,  
leaning on the everlasting arms.  
Leaning, leaning, safe and secure from all alarms;  
leaning, leaning, leaning on the everlasting arms.”<sup>10</sup>

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>10</sup> “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms,” words by Elisha A. Hoffman and music by Anthony J. Showalter (1887), *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 133.