

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
July 16, 2023

Surviving Disaster

Mark 4:35-41

Many of you have probably never heard of the Winooski River in Montpelier, Vermont. Neither had I, until earlier this week when I researched the news on record rainfall and flooding in New England. On Tuesday, the Winooski crested at 21 feet, 6 feet above flood stage, the second highest crest on record. That's more than a foot and a half higher than the previous record set during Hurricane Irene in 2011. It's also the highest water level in almost 100 years. Approximately 2 million people in New England were under flood alerts, and more than 100 rescues were made.¹

If there was to be a rescue for Jesus' frightened disciples, it would have to come from within the boat, not from a team outside the boat. That's why the disciples turn to Jesus, who's there with them in the midst of an unexpected and violent storm. There's only one problem—Jesus is sound asleep. While the wind roars, Jesus snores. So when the disciples wake him, the first thing they do is accuse him of indifference or negligence. "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?"

As one commentator has put it, their statement has an air of "inevitable doom" about it. In other words, "We are dying." "We are going down and only you can save us."² The disciples recognize the scope and scale of the threat. This isn't just a passing shower. It's a chaotic force unleashed against life itself. No wonder one person has described this scene as the "boat ride from hell."³

That's the way it can feel when storms, including literal ones, threaten life and human well-being. It can seem like hell has the upper hand. In the skies, on the waters, in the air, under the ground. Earthquakes, hurricanes, wildfires, floods, famines, mudslides, tornadoes, and other forms of death and destruction here on planet earth. We often call them "natural disasters," though we understandably struggle and wonder if there's more going on than just the forces of nature. What about the presence of God? Where is God in all this? Is God really good and sovereign? What does it mean to say that God is in charge of his creation? What are we supposed to think when the skies darken, all hell is breaking loose, and yet it seems that the Lord is asleep in the rear end of the boat?

In 2007, Ernie Chambers, a Nebraska state senator, sued God for "causing untold death and horror" in the form of "fearsome floods ... horrendous hurricanes, [and] terrifying tornadoes." Furthermore, said Chambers, God has wrought "widespread death [and] destruction" and terrorized "millions upon millions of the Earth's inhabitants." Chambers, who was outraged by a recent lawsuit he considered frivolous, filed his suit against God in order to make a statement about the American court system. He wanted to demonstrate that "anybody can file a lawsuit against anybody."⁴ Even so, his case against the Almighty reflected questions that many of us may wrestle with as inhabitants of a chaotic and violent planet.

A decade ago, following some devastating tornadoes that struck Oklahoma, LifeWay Research conducted a survey about suffering and faith in God. When people were asked, "How do you feel about God when suffering occurs that seems unfair?" this is how they responded. Thirty-three percent said, "I trust God more." Twenty-five percent said, "I am confused about God." Sixteen percent said, "I don't think about God in these circumstances." Eleven percent said, "I wonder if God cares." Eight percent said, "I am angry or resentful at God." And seven percent said, "I doubt God exists."⁵

After Jesus had calmed the storm, one hundred percent of the disciples in the boat responded, not with a statement but with a question: "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!" (v. 41). Recall that a few moments earlier, they had called him "Teacher." But by this point in their experience, it's less about instruction and more about revelation. Not only *something*, but most of all *someone*, is being made known to them. And their response to this unveiling is a question, a question driven by fear. "Terrified" in the translation I read. Mark's terminology literally means "they feared a great fear." Their fear certainly seems reasonable, considering the threat they had faced, the disaster they had just survived. But what does that say about their trust in Jesus? Can't they see that they're in the presence of power greater than the stormy forces that had threatened to destroy them?

"Peace! Be still!" says Jesus. We often hear his words as a command that brings outward calm and inner serenity. There's certainly some truth in that. But that particular translation loses some of the shock and force of the original language. Jesus' abrupt command literally means "Be silent! Be muzzled!" Or as another translation puts it, "Quiet now! Be calm!" (NEB). You see, Jesus talks to this storm the same way he has talked to demons thus far in Mark's Gospel. In fact, Mark's word for "storm" is also the word for "whirlwind" in the book of Job (38:1), a word that carries overtones of demonic power, chaos. Add all this up, and we begin to see that what Jesus is going up against is more than just a matter of meteorology. It's a matter of theology. In other words, this storm is more than just a matter of clouds, wind, and rain. It's also a matter of chaos and destruction, the power of death threatening God's gift of life.

We human beings can't fully wrap our minds around these things. We're like Job, to whom God posed a question in today's reading from the Old Testament: "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand" (38:4). In the previous chapter, Job's friend Elihu uses both thunderstorms and winter storms to underscore God's majesty. "[His] voice thunders in marvelous ways; he does great things beyond our understanding" (v. 5).

In August 2017, theology professor W. David O. Taylor wrote an article titled "When Jesus Doesn't Calm the Storm," in which reflected on his experience of Hurricane Harvey, a storm that dumped more than a trillion gallons of water on the city of Houston. Taylor wrote:

In my theology class at Fuller Theological Seminary, I teach my students about the doctrine of Providence. It describes God's work of preservation, conservation, and perfection of the world that he so loves. The Father, in the Son, by the Spirit protects creation against a reversion to the chaos of Genesis 1:1, enables creation to flourish, and ensures creation's good, pleasing, and perfect purpose.

It's easy for me to say this in class while standing at the lectern with a coffee in hand, while the air conditioning keeps the room at an even temperature. It's another for me to believe it while arguing with my wife, Phaedra—with the wind rattling our windows and the waters covering over our backyard—or while reading the news online.⁶

In a disaster-filled world, people enduring the planet's chaos and devastation don't necessarily need easy answers or tidy theological explanations for their suffering. They need the good news of a God whose sovereign love will prevail and who is present in the midst of the suffering. And they need that good news both spoken and embodied in practice by followers of Jesus who are themselves present with help and hope.

At the 9/11 memorial site, near the footprint of the South Tower, is a special tree. It's a Callery pear tree that was originally planted near Building 5 of the World Trade Center. Each spring, the tree's delicate white blossoms brought a touch of spring into a world of concrete. After the 9/11 attack, the tree disappeared beneath the fallen towers. But remarkably, the next month, a cleanup worker found the tree, smashed and pinned beneath blocks of concrete. The tree was decapitated and the trunk charred black. Its roots were broken, and there was only one living branch. Though many thought the tree was unsalvageable, it was sent off to a nursery in the Bronx where, with lots of care and attention, it survived. In fact, the tree was given the name Survivor.

In the spring of 2010 disaster struck Survivor again. The tree was ripped out of the ground by a terrible storm with 100 mile per hour winds. Rescue workers began by partially lifting the tree, packing in compost and mulch so as not to break the roots. Over time, they sprayed the tree with water to minimize the shock, and eventually got it completely upright. As one person has summarized it, Survivor was once again resurrected from the dead. Today the tree is planted with its traumatized side facing the public.⁷ It still bears the marks of disaster, and in doing so witnesses to its own rescue and redemption.

I think of Paul's words in Romans 8, where he elaborates on the future glory that God has promised, not only for his redeemed people but for the whole cosmos. He speaks of the hope that "the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (v. 21). By God's mercy and saving power, somehow this disaster-filled planet will experience its own redemption and resurrection.

This is a hope reflected in the words of theologian David Bentley Hart, who wrote a book that included reflections on the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, a disaster that killed at least 225,000 people across a dozen countries. Hart writes of how Christians maintain hope in the goodness of creation and the goodness of God, especially when it doesn't make sense. Part of the way we do this is by the way we see. True, we see the brokenness and violence of the natural world. But we see more. We see the beauty of God's creative power. Hart says, "To see in this way is to rejoice and mourn at once, to regard the world as a mirror of infinite beauty, but as glimpsed through the veil of death; it is to see creation in chains, but beautiful as in the beginning of days."⁸

Here in our county, we've had our own experiences with natural disaster. Perhaps the one that stands out most is the 2002 tornado that devastated parts of LaPlata and other areas in its path. Three people were killed and 122 injured. The town now maintains tornado sirens in multiple locations. One of them is in front of the Charles County Courthouse. As you pass through town, that siren tower, and the bell tower of Christ Church, end up in the same field of vision. Seeing them together strikes me that those two towers are more than just functional. They can also be symbolic. The siren tower is a tower of warning, a reminder that we inhabit a world that can be both beautiful and terrifying, filled with delight and destruction. The other tower, the church tower, is a tower of hope, a reminder that God has promised to bring a new heavens and a new earth into being through Christ, the same Christ who was in the boat, experiencing the storm and conquering the storm. Because of him, we are not alone, and we can live with the joy of knowing that the one whom the wind and the waves obey will have the last word.

¹ "Vermont floods have led to more than 100 rescues, officials say." NBC News live blog. July 11, 2023. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/live-blog/floods-vermont-weather-rain-storms-new-england-live-updates-rcna93587> (July 11, 2023).

² See Richard Lischer, "Resurrection and Rhetoric." In *Marks of the Body of Christ*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 16.

³ David Schnasa Jacobsen. Commentary on Mark 4:35-41. Working Preacher. June 20, 2021. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-12-2/commentary-on-mark-435-41-5> (July 12, 2023).

⁴ "Nebraska state senator sues God in protest." (Associated Press) USA Today (October 8, 2007).

⁵ Research: Americans Turn to God and Generosity after Natural Disasters. Facts & Trends (May 28, 2013).

⁶ W. David O. Taylor, "When Jesus Doesn't Calm the Storm." Christianity Today. August 31, 2017. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2017/august-web-only/when-jesus-doesnt-calm-storm-hurricane-harvey-houston-flood.html> (July 12, 2023).

⁷ Tree Survives 9/11 and a Massive Storm. Preaching Today. <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2013/march/2031813.html> (July 13, 2023).

⁸ Quoted in Todd Wilson's sermon, "The Goodness of Creation." Preaching Today. <https://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2017/september/goodness-of-creation.html> (July 13, 2023).