

## *Is God Asleep?*

Mark 4:35-41

Yesterday I crashed the Saturday morning men's study and fellowship group. We watched part of a Smithsonian made-for-tv documentary series, "Jesus of Nazareth." Forty years ago the actor Robert Powell played Jesus in a movie called "Jesus of Nazareth." In this documentary, Powell is revisiting the Holy Land to come to terms with who Jesus really is. Clips from that film are interspersed with footage of sites of Jesus' ministry and interviews with Biblical scholars and the actor Robert Powell himself. Early on in the documentary, they showed the fragments of a boat discovered in an archaeological dig near the Sea of Galilee. Those fragments date back to the time of Jesus. That boat has been re-assembled and is on display in a museum.

Today we meet the disciples in what could have been that very boat. They're in that boat with Jesus, and Jesus is sleeping. A storm rises up and the disciples get anxious. They awaken Jesus. "Teacher, don't you care that we are dying?" Or, as one translation says, "Teacher, are we to drown for all you care?" Nothing irritates us more than someone who can sleep through a crisis. And when the one who is sleeping is *God* – that makes the crisis even worse.

In the novel *The Color Purple*, Celie writes letters to God about her life of suffering and poverty in the rural South. In these letters, Celie's childlike faith is shaken by repeated indignities. Her father is lynched. Her mother goes mad. Celie is abused and raped. As her life is pulling apart into fragments, she writes a "Dear God" letter that concludes, "God, you must be asleep."

In some ways, reading this Gospel for today is like watching not a documentary, but a TV "sitcom." In a TV sitcom, everything is resolved in 20 minutes, with ten minutes of commercials thrown in to make a 30 minute show. In this Gospel, everything is resolved in one paragraph.

In real life, it's not like this. At least not in the life *I* know. We might read this story and secretly say to ourselves, "It doesn't happen this way for *me*." So, we deal with the story by dismissing it, or compartmentalizing it. Maybe we just rationalize that *our* faith isn't as strong as the faith of the disciples. So we don't come to *expect* miracles. Maybe we find some other way to exclude ourselves or distance ourselves from being touched by Jesus' power.

Well, for the early Christians for whom this gospel was written, real life wasn't like this story either. The folks for whom this Gospel was written were struggling martyrs. They didn't have the benefit of Jesus' earthly presence among them the way those first disciples did. This Gospel was written for the church in Rome. In Rome at that time the emperor Nero was feeding good Christians to the lions and burning their flesh at parties. Peter had been crucified, Paul beheaded. Their leaders were gone. Their life was more like Celie's life in *The Color Purple*.

But when the Roman Christians heard this story of the storm rising up on the lake and of Jesus sleeping and being unavailable, we can imagine it spoke *volumes* to them. They *knew* that in Scripture, the sea is a symbol for chaos. The sea represents the principalities and powers of this world that sometimes mock or even thwart the will of God. If you've seen the movie *The Perfect Storm* you get a sense of how powerful that chaos can be. These early Christians *also* knew that in Scripture, the boat is a symbol for the church. The word *nave* literally means ship. That's the part of this room where you are sitting. And so they could see *themselves* in the story. Jesus is asleep as this new church tosses about in the middle of the chaos and confusion and danger of persecution. These struggling Christians could readily cry out with the disciples, "Teacher, don't you *care* that we are dying?"

These early Christians also knew that often in the stories of Scripture, time is suspended. In the story, Jesus *may* have been awakened immediately. Jesus *may* have calmed the sea immediately. The disciples *may* have been in awe immediately. But probably this was more like a "snapshot" of how it works – the way a sitcom captures

what happens during the course of a week or a month or a year for a family. The bottom line – the essence of the story – is that ultimately, God prevails. And so in this story, those early Christians, tossed about in the chaos of their persecution, could find incredible hope.

Theologian Walter Wink says, “The fact that the *powers* can temporarily thwart God is more than matched by the knowledge that our intercessions will ultimately prevail.” The timing and even the outcome may not be to our liking. But ultimately and eventually, the power of God prevails. My African American friends put it this way: “God may not come when you want Him to, but he always comes on time.” Martin Luther King Jr put it this way: “The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.”

Well now, if *time* in the stories of Scripture can be suspended, the stories of Scripture can also be *timeless*. And that means that this story, written down originally for the earliest Christians in Rome, is also a story for us, some 2,000 years later. If the earliest Christians could find incredible hope in this story, then so can we. Has anyone here experienced any chaos lately? Confusion? Despair?

Sometimes a big wind comes along and stirs that chaos up a bit. And we get a storm. And the chaos and confusion can swamp us. And we get scared, or at least anxious. Eventually we might start to wonder, “Where the heck is Jesus in the middle of this storm? He must be asleep!”

Sometimes Jesus’ power *is* thwarted by the chaos – or at least delayed or blocked — blocked by the principalities and powers that compete for our hearts and minds. These same powers fight for and often capture the hearts and minds of our culture, our politics, our society. Our prayers, our intercessions and pleas for healing and justice and peace, are like the disciples’ pleas to Jesus to wake up while he sleeps through the storm. When we pray the Prayers of the People in worship, when we offer prayers throughout the week, we *are* the disciples in the storm tossed boat-church, calling to Jesus, “Wake up!” I believe it’s no coincidence that the design for *this* particular nave is also a depiction of praying hands. Keep that prayer coming. Believe me, it is making a difference. Even if you don’t see it in twenty minutes or one paragraph or today or tomorrow. The timing and even the outcome may not always be to our liking. But ultimately and eventually, the power of God prevails. “God may not come when we want Him to, but he always comes on time.”

*Pastor Dana Runestad*

24 June, 2018 BProper 7

Sources:

<https://quoteinvestigator.com/2012/11/15/arc-of-universe/>

<https://onlinechurchforchrist.files.wordpress.com/2017/07/understanding-spiritual-warfare-james-k-beilby.pdf>