



**SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE**  
**in the City of New York**  
*The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector*  
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**June 20, 2021**  
*The Fourth Sunday After Pentecost*

*Festal Eucharist*  
*11 am*

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A Sermon by  
The reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*  
*on*  
Job 38:1-11 and Mark 4:35-41  
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### **Job and the Stilling of the Storm**

**Thou whose almighty word**  
**Chaos and darkness heard,**  
**And took their flight:**  
**Hear us, we humbly pray,**  
**And where the gospel-day**  
**Sheds not its glorious ray,**  
**Let there be light! <sup>1</sup>**

In the first session of the pilgrim's course, we explore the theme of God as Father and Creator, and I like to share a very simple yet profound way of looking at the way things were intended to be from Michael Ramsey's book 'Introducing the Christian Faith' - a collection of addresses given during a mission to the University of Oxford in the 1960s. Archbishop Ramsey told the students that there was meant to be an order in creation: God-Man-Things, but that one of the consequences of the fall was that 'Man' had asserted his place in creation over God. Speaking at the time of the Cuban missile Crisis, the stockpiling of nuclear weapons, and the mistrust caused by the so-called 'iron curtain' in Europe, Ramsey suggested that even more dangerous was the utter reversal of the natural order of creation (God-Man-Things) to become Things-Man-God. And we all know the consequences when humankind allows 'things' dominate the world stage.

There are many who question this 'natural order' because it begs the question, "If God is the ultimate source of all order in creation, then how do we explain the presence of evil or disease or suffering in creation?" If war, poverty, and injustice flow very much from human sin and self-aggrandizement, how do you explain the presence of natural disaster, terminal disease, plague, or indeed, pandemic?

Worse, there are some who think that the presence of human suffering is a kind of message from God himself. How many times have I heard people struggling with some awfulness say, "Is God punishing me?" The great Theologian Bishop N.T. Wright has written a little book titled 'God and the Pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and its Aftermath.' In a recent interview he said this, *"Overall, I think part of our problem is the rationalism of the last two or three hundred years in the Western world, which has soaked into the church because the rationalist critics of Christianity have said things like: "Aha, look, modern science shows us that Christianity is false!" In response, rationalist Christians have said, "No, let's show how it is all completely rational!" That can lead to us wanting to have the answer to everything, and so we want to say things like: "Because God is sovereign, he must either have done this deliberately or at least permitted it deliberately." We think that we should be able to see what he's up to. But I really don't think we are given that kind of access."*

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And that, my friends, is the central message of the Book of Job, a small passage of which was our first reading today - those very themes of the presence of evil and suffering in creation.

The story begins with a man who has everything: Family, children, land, real-estate, servants, flocks and herds, good health, money, and on top of it all, he is a faithful and God-fearing Jew. He is, if you will, the archetypal "boy-made-good" of the bible. But the Devil (known in the story as 'the accuser') taunts God and suggests that Job is only faithful because of all his wealth and success; *"Stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face,"* (Job 1:11) says the accuser.

If you know the book then you will remember that one calamity after another affects Job; he loses his property, his children, even his flocks and servants. To which, on hearing the news, Job famously says, *"The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD."* (Job 1:21) So, then the Accuser goes one step further and takes away Job's health. As Job sits despondent, Job's wife angrily encourages Job to curse God and die. Now comes his dark night of the soul and Job sinks into what we might describe as clinical depression.

At this stage of the story, three of Job's friends come to visit him and are shocked by what they find. In what is one of the most pitiful passages in the Bible, Job curses not God but the day he was born: "*Let the day perish in which I was born, and the night that said, 'A man-child is conceived.' Let that day be darkness!*" (Job 3:3) This is, of course, the opposite to the story of creation. In the story of creation, God creates light but Job craves *darkness*.

The three friends then give speeches that explore various rationalizations of Job's condition – perhaps he had sinned; maybe he deserved this; and even his depression is an insult to religion! Job responds each time from his desperation, affirming his innocence, and praying for relief: "*Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble.*" His friends continue their speeches which are completely unhelpful and to which Job famously responds, "*I know that my redeemer liveth, And He shall stand at last on the earth; And after my skin is destroyed, this I know, That in my flesh I shall see God,*" (Job 19:25-26).

But throughout the book God remains silent and it is not until Chapter 38 that Job is able to hear from his redeemer. Significantly, God speaks from a whirlwind – a storm – and in the Hebrew Scriptures this means that we know that means something powerful is about to happen. But what God says is not what you might expect. God speaks to Job of giving birth to the created order. But God does not speak simply of natural order found in creation, described in our reading today with architectural precision, God also speaks of creating the sea with its waves and storms and, in the next chapter, of creating the great sea monsters Behemoth and Leviathan, who represent chaos. God not only creates order; **he is also the creator of chaos**. At the end of the story, there is no answer to the question "Why do people suffer?" Instead, as Job himself says, "*See, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth.*" (Job 40:4) or, as N.T. Wright puts it, "*We think that we should be able to see what [God's] up to. But I really don't think we are given that kind of access.*"

And that takes us to the Gospel reading. The first thing to remember is the context of this passage – it comes after a series of parables of the Kingdom of God. We need to bear this in mind as we read the passage of Jesus stilling the storm. Secondly, it is evening – which for the Jew means it is the beginning of a new day; also, it is dark. Thirdly, there is a storm – a windstorm that whipped up waves big enough to fill the boat with water. So, as in the Book of Job, something powerful is going to happen. And the next thing to notice is a detail that could so easily be missed - Jesus and the disciples are not alone; Mark is very clear - we are told that there are other boats with them.

Now, I have always found something odd about this story. Jesus had recently called his disciples, and several of them were fishermen. So, it must have been some storm because they are afraid. However, Jesus is asleep on a cushion in the stern! (If you have been in boat on rough seas, you know that is *not* the place to be!). It seems incredible that Jesus is oblivious to this storm. But perhaps there is more to this story than meets the eye. Perhaps this is more than just another miracle.

We know from the Hebrew Scriptures that water is a sign of God's creativity; the first story of creation in the Book of Genesis begins with God's Spirit hovering over the waters of chaos. We also know that creation in Genesis begins with the Word - "Let there be light." The Book of Job has also these themes - water - chaos - and God's redemptive presence appearing from the midst of a whirlwind. So, in this passage of Mark, we have God incarnate - the Word made flesh, waking, and rebuking the storm. This word of rebuke would, of course, have been understood in the early days of the Church as **exorcism**. God, in Christ, is driving out the chaos - or to use the words of the Book of Job, "*Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped.*" So, we ask ourselves, what is the chaos that Jesus is exorcising?

The storm ceases and Mark tells us that there is a **dead calm**.

At the time that Mark's Gospel was written, the infant church was already in the midst of chaos. For many years, the followers of Jesus had been persecuted as enemies of the State, hunted down, and killed. They had already been thrown out of the Temple and the Synagogues but then, around 70AD, the time when most scholars believe Mark's gospel was written, the Imperial Roman army sacked Jerusalem and *destroyed* the Temple.

Chaos.

Some scholars have also suggested that this story about Jesus that should be seen in the same light as the Resurrection appearances of the other gospels. Remember, the oldest form of Mark's Gospel does not have any Resurrection appearances; instead, it ends with the empty tomb and the disciples running away, *afraid*. Those same themes are present here in the passage; there darkness; there is chaos; Jesus is asleep (remember, in the scriptures that is a favorite word to describe death) and we also know that at the time of Jesus' death there was darkness over the land and the veil of the Temple was torn in two - there was a storm - in Matthew's Gospel there is also an earthquake. Even the Greek word for Jesus

getting up from his sleep is powerful, for the Greek word is *'arose.'* And which word does Jesus use when he exorcises or rebukes the storm? **“Peace!”** The word associated with his resurrection appearances in both Luke and John. How do the disciples react? With *awe and fear*, just as they do at the end of Mark's Gospel.

When the Gospels were written, they were written through the lens of the Resurrection. When *we* read the Gospels, we already know how the story will end! Equally, we need to understand the context in which they were written 2000 years ago and the significance of many of these words and themes, often lost on us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

To use a technical theological term, this story of the stilling of the storm is a *theophany* – a manifestation of God's glory; a revelation of God's very self to mere mortals. The God who created; the God who redeems; the God who brings peace and order to, as the collect for the Fifth Sunday of Lent so beautifully put it, “the unruly wills and affections of sinful men.”

Since the whole of the New Testament is written in response to the Resurrection, we begin to see how this story of the stilling of the storm is charged with power. This is far more than a miracle – and far more than a parable – it is a revelation of God's sovereignty over the whole created order and over the Church. And that's where the other boats come in (you see, we could easily forget them!) Jesus and his disciples were not on their own - *we* are not on our own. How significant that we even call the place where we gather a *nave* – a word which means boat or ship. And when the storms arise (as they will my friends) and God seems asleep (as he will my friends) we can think back to this story and remember that the Resurrection changed things for ever. Changed things for those who are poor; changed things for those who marginalized because of their race, or the color of their skin, or their social class and status, or their gender, or the sexual orientation; changed for those who are sick or diseased or dying; changed for those who are suffering from drought or famine or simply a lack of clean water; changed for those who are suffering from natural disaster; changed for those who have lost their jobs and homes; changed for those who have no friends; changed for those who weep and mourn. Like the author of the Book of Job, we may not have any answers at all to the great mysteries of life, but we do know this as Christians: ‘That my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God.’ (Job 19:25-26).

<sup>1</sup>. John Marriott (1780-1825) from *The Hymnal 1982* n.371

<sup>2</sup> N.T. Wright interview in *Christianity Today* magazine ‘The Pandemic should make us humble – and relentlessly practical.’ (August 3, 2020)