

This story is mysterious. On one level, it is a display of Jesus' power. St. Luke, through chapters 7 and 8, systematically tells a series of such stories that demonstrate Jesus' power over sickness, death, sin, nature and demons. The point of these stories may very well be summed up in the disciple's awed question, "Who then is this that he commands even the winds and water and they obey him?" This is God's Son.

And yet, on another level, even as Jesus does exactly what we would expect him to do by using his divine power to control the storm and save his friends in the boat from death, the story contains a rebuke: "Where is your faith?" Have the disciples failed somehow in this story? Have we, as the readers, also shown our own lack of faith by being awed alongside them? Is there some other reaction to this story that Jesus hoped we'd have instead?

Storms, including the one in this story, are ripe for metaphorical interpretation. We use storms as an image to describe the conflict, angst, foul moods, and life's challenges. I heard a preacher once wonder if perhaps the storm in this story was an argument that arose among the disciples, perhaps regarding their destination across the sea in Gentile territory. Whenever we use storms metaphorically, it is almost always to describe something bad, evil, or unpleasant.

And yet, we are also aware that we need storms. Everyone loves a sunny day, but too many sunny days in a row without rain can be disastrous to crops and livestock and create the perfect conditions for wildfires. As we read this story and puzzle over Jesus' words to his disciples, I find myself wondering if maybe calming the storm—as dangerous as it is—isn't something we should expect Jesus to do.

Luke is not vague about the fact that the occupants of the boat are in real danger. It is not as though these men—some of whom are seasoned fishermen and experienced sailors—scared too easily. We have every reason to believe that they were in imminent danger of sinking. I also notice that they call Jesus "Master," rather than the much more common "Lord." Both have connotations of authority, but the Greek word for "Master" is particularly hierarchical, like "chief" or "boss."

I find myself wondering if it might also be like a "captain"—as of a boat, for example. I wonder if the implication here is that the disciples think it is Jesus' *responsibility* to keep them from dying, and that is why they wake him up. "We are perishing!" they say, but maybe what is left unsaid is, "You're doing a bad job of piloting this boat!" The storm may not be his fault, but maybe they think that the danger they are in is.

Is that how we think of God? Do we hold God responsible for the bad things that happen to us? I can't tell you how many stories I know in which this is the very stumbling block that stands between people and faith in God. Because evil exists, God must not. Because storms arise, God cannot be; or, at least, cannot be good. If God is good and loving, why does evil exist? It just doesn't make any sense; it is foolishness.

Job and his friends come to the same conclusion. While Bildad, Zophar and Eliphaz are convinced that Job must have done something wrong to deserve his punishment, Job grows increasingly more convinced that God has actually sinned against him by allowing or even causing this tragedy to happen to him unfairly. Isn't God responsible for keeping virtuous people like him safe and happy? What kind of master allows people like him to perish?

The testimony of creation says otherwise: here, by God's wisdom, are life and death, growth and decay, the nest and the hunt, sunshine and storm, darkness and light, side by side. This is how creation has always been, and—if we are to believe scripture—how it will always be because this is what the Creator has called “good.” How foolish is that?

Paul knows enough about God from knowing Christ crucified to know that this foolishness, as mysterious as it is to us, is wiser than any wisdom of which we ourselves are capable. He sees God's weakness—weakness openly revealed on the cross—is stronger than all the strength and power and authority that humans wielded to put Jesus there. He observes that, rather than doing as we would and calling the wise and powerful and privileged in order to sway the masses and bring the world under God's control, God instead calls the weak, the shameful, the foolish and the despised in order to shame the wise and the strong, to “reduce to nothing the things that are.”

The story of Jesus and the storm leaves me wondering if one of those things that needs to be reduced to nothing is the belief in a “Master” God who does what Jesus does in this story: a God who quiets storms and prevents calamities and violates the natural order of the world to save the people we believe to be the best and brightest: the most virtuous, the most faithful, the most pious. Maybe that is why Jesus asks his disciples where their faith is.

Richard Rohr observes that only those who have received deep forgiveness themselves are capable of extending such forgiveness. It is our very brokenness—which causes us to need forgiveness to begin with—that allows us to love others more fully. Could it be that this brokenness, rather than being a weakness of humanity, is actually one of our strengths? After reading this story and considering the testimony of the storm, I wonder if the same might be true

about suffering. It is only when we ourselves have suffered greatly that we are most empathetic and motivated to love those who suffer. I begin to wonder if the suffering that exists in creation is not a bug, but a feature.

Let me be clear. I am absolutely *not* saying that I believe “everything happens for a reason;” that God is doling out hardship in order to “build character” or bring about some “greater good” through suffering. What I am wondering is whether a storm can testify to God’s presence. Can something be, at the same time, terribly unpleasant and yet also, somehow, a place where God is hidden? Can God really be present in something horrendous, something like a tortured death on a cross?

Martin Luther famously wrote that a “theologian of glory calls the good thing evil and the evil thing good,” while “a theologian of the cross calls a thing what it is.” I used to think that he meant that the theologian of the cross is able to discern the truth of what is good and evil so as to call the good thing good and the evil thing evil; but that’s not what he said. Now I wonder if he might have meant that a theologian of the cross is wise enough to see things for what they are, neither good nor evil because they are so often both.

A thunderstorm, for example, is neither good nor evil. Lightning strikes may spark wildfires and dark skies may ruin a picnic, but fires renew forests, and rain brings growth and vitality to the earth. Might this foolishness teach us something of God’s wisdom? Might it have something to say about the metaphorical storms we encounter throughout our lives?

This is a deep mystery. We human beings, by our nature, like to apply our wisdom to solve mysteries. We observe suffering or misfortune and try to find the cause, the reason, the justification. I wonder if we do this work so that we can ultimately to avoid those things; to be able to control the weather, as it were, and to either avoid or calm the storms. If we understand how or why suffering works, then maybe we can escape it or control it. If we don’t understand it yet, we have faith that technology or knowledge or intellect will increase to the point that, someday, we will.

But when I say that this is a “mystery,” I don’t mean that it is something that we are not yet wise enough to understand, I mean that it is something that wisdom fundamentally cannot understand. I may be able to know how the storm forms and even, with enough information, to predict where it will go and what it will do and how long it will last; but I will never be able to understand what the purpose or the function of a storm is, because it has no purpose, no function.

It simply is. When the storm comes, there is nothing for me to understand: I can only stand under it until it passes.

I wonder if this might be the “faith” the disciples seem to be lacking today. Does their “wisdom”—their understanding of how God and the world and the sea are *supposed* to work—keep them from being able to simply standing under the mystery of God revealed in the wind and the waves? The Book of Job observes that it is God’s wisdom that gives direction and guidance to the wind and the rain and the thunderbolt. Jesus *can* calm the storm, but is he disappointed that this is what they want him to do?

Jesus did still this storm, but when another storm hit and threatened his life, he let the wind howl and the waves rage. He foolishly let his boat sink and allowed himself to perish. When we look at that storm, what do we see: proof of God’s absence, or the mystery of God’s presence? Is this mystery limited to that storm alone, or can we look at any storm—literal or metaphorical—to witness this mystery?

What storms are you weathering in your life? What winds buffet us as a community? Even as we struggle to stay afloat, what might we be able to learn from the God’s wisdom in the wind and the waves?