

“Experiencing God Amidst the Storms”

Job 38:1-11 Mark 4:35-41

Scott B. Martin - June 21, 2009

Life is not always smooth sailing. Sooner or later we are going to run into storms. Some storms we see coming from a long way off, like approaching old age. Some storms sneak up on us like cancer, or some other medical diagnosis. Some storms arise from circumstances around us, like wars or losing a job. Sometimes we experience the winds from storms in our loved one's lives and we too get caught up in the hurricane. Some people seem to have more than their fair share of storms, while others seem to sail placidly along. None the less, sooner or later we all will experience storms in life.

When we are in the midst of storms we look for a safe haven. We also are move to ask questions like: “What am I doing here?” or “Is anyone,... is God in charge?” or “Can anyone, anything, help me?” “Will this storm stop?”

It was my experiences at our United Church of Christ church camp, Lake Byrd Lodge in Florida that led me to go into the ministry. It was the people I met there and the way the faith was lived out, addressing the issues of the day like the Viet Nam War, the farm workers movement, and civil rights that inspired me.

I worked at the camp myself, first in the kitchen and maintenance and later as a permanent summer counselor and life guard. Among the many people I admired who came back year after year as a temporary counselor was a young woman we knew as “Sunny.” I'm

sure it was a nickname. It certainly described her personality. Sunny always had a smile and she definitely had a sunny disposition. Just to be in her presence was to experience the warmth of a loving spirit.

Sunny was in her early twenties. She was from Miami. We learned one summer that she was engaged to be married the following year. I went off to college at the University of Florida. I believe it about Christmas time, the time we celebrate the birth of Jesus, God with us, that I learned that Sunny had died of a brain hemorrhage.

Somehow or another I found out when the funeral was to be. I drove down to Miami for the funeral. The night before they had a gathering at the funeral home. The family was there. I was standing near Sunny's father. He was talking with someone who had expressed their condolences. I don't remember the funeral or much else about that night but I remember as if it was yesterday what he said, "I don't think I will ever be able to worship God again."

Some might criticize that he needed to have a stronger faith, maybe so; but I believe allowances have to be made. Disappointment, grief, emptiness must be allowed to be given voice, as hard as it might be for the rest of us to hear it. Why is it so hard to hear such words? Is it just because we fear for that person's faith and their spirit? Or could it be that these words of emptiness and loss somehow resonate with our own inner caverns? Given the circumstances I don't think even God would be offended by this comment. After all, isn't part of the Christian message that God too has experienced the emptiness of death, in the death of Jesus the Christ, on a cross. In one of the Gospels did Jesus himself not cry

out in mortal anguish from the cross, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me!

I pray that Sunny’s father was able, with the passage of time, to worship God again, to pray again, to experience again God’s presence in his life, that somehow the Spirit that intercedes with sighs too deep for words was able to help fill the void left by the death of his daughter Sunny. I don’t know that this ever happened, but I pray that it did.

This is just one family’s tragic loss; but sadly we know that we can multiply this millions, if not tens of millions of time. Events like the Nazi holocaust in WWII, other genocides like those in Cambodia, Rwanda, and most recently Darfur raise serious questions at a minimum about the love of God, the justice of God, the power of God, to say nothing of the very existence of God. Add to this tragic circumstances of the Christmas tsunami several years ago that killed over hundred thousand people outright and Hurricane Katrina and the millions around the world experiencing the horrors of war and poverty right this very minute. The list is endless. Suffice it to say that there all kinds of storms in life that raise serious questions about how God acts, if God acts, or even if there is a God.

There is a story about a group of Auschwitz prisoners who decided to put God on Trial for allowing the holocaust to happen and thus essentially break the covenant with the Jewish people, so often spoken of in the Scriptures. Now this story is probably apocryphal, but it speaks to our human condition in general.

Actually this is exactly what we have in the book of Job. Job is an innocent man, a righteous man who worships God. Yet, we are told

that God and the Devil have a wager. The point in question is whether or not Job worships God because he has been abundantly blessed with a prosperous farm, loving children, the respect of the community, etc. The Devil says if Job were to lose all this he would curse God. God tells the Devil he can do anything he wants to Job, except kill him.

The Devil does his worst. Invaders destroy his farm. The roof of his house caves in and his children are killed. He himself is afflicted with boils all over his body. All he is left with is a harping wife who tells him to curse God and die and so called friends who tell him all this has happened because he is a sinner. Job knows better. He essentially wants to put God on trial and sets about to do so in God's absence. So you see, even the Bible is willing to recognize the thought of putting God on trial. It arises from the human condition in the world. It arises because of all the storms we face in our lives. As usual the Bible is brutally honest about the human condition.

Frank Cottrell Boyce is a good practicing Catholic and he has written the script for a film, *God on Trial*, which showed on PBS. It is based on the idea of a group of Jews in a concentration camp putting God on trial.

As part of the process he consulted rabbis, read Scripture, the Talmud and books on theology. He thought this would not only help him with the script but he thought it would strengthen his faith. Instead, he says it almost "killed it!" So many Old Testament stories presented a God who was capricious, who played favorites and then dropped them, and a God who set ridiculous tests. The people too were in many respects horrible!

As a script writer he loved the stories as stories but he said the Catholic side of him was being “beaten black and blue.” He says of this experience, “ **I thought my faith was invulnerable. I’ve been through family illness. I’ve witnessed cruelty. I read Darwin all the time and find it feeds my faith. Richard Dawkins,**” the noted atheist, “**makes me want to pray, the same as Homer Simpson makes me want to exercise – for fear that I, too, will end up like him, a whining pub bore with the prose style of an internet conspiracy theorist. The first real challenge to my faith came from reading the scriptures. It may seem deliciously ironic to you, but for me it was a time of permanent headache and no sleep. I felt that half of me was dying.**”

(The Guardian, Tuesday August 19, 2008)

I have not had a chance to see this movie yet, but I can tell you it is on my list to purchase. Maybe we can show it here at church and discuss it afterwards.

When he was pitching the movie he said it wasn’t about the holocaust, it was about God, but then as the movie was being made he began to see that in some way it was not so much about God as about the question, “How could people have a theological argument on the way to the gas chamber?” “Where does such heroism come from?” That is a very good question.

There is no doubt that storms like the holocaust have caused many to lose their faith. It is equally true that this crucible has led others to come away with their faith in God tremendously changed; but strengthened. Victor Frankl is one such person and there are others.

Surprising, or maybe not so surprisingly, in the movie *God on Trial*, God is found guilty of breaking the covenant. But the good news is that the story does not end there. After the guilty verdict is read one of the rabbis asks, "What shall we do now?" The trial is over. God has been found guilty. They are still in the concentration camp. What shall they do now? The reply comes back from another rabbi, "Let us pray." "Let us pray."

Boyce sites French Philosopher La Rochefoucauld, who says, "**A great storm puts out a little fire, but it feeds a strong one.**" I think there is a lot of truth to this. Jesus made much of the idea that "a little faith can move mountains." In saying this I don't think he was encouraging us to have as little faith as possible! Instead, I believe Jesus was saying take what little faith we have, shield it, protect, nourish it and USE it. Put your faith to work and in doing so the winds of the Holy Spirit will gently blow on it until it becomes a roaring fire that can light up the darkest night and keep the winter storms at bay. Amen.