

LORD, SAVE US!

PSALM 46; MATTHEW 8: 18-27

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THOMAS H. YORTY, WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

I love the Children's Defense Fund poster that pictures a tiny boat crossing a huge expanse of water. The caption reads, "my boat is so little and the sea is so large." Perhaps that is how Noah and his family were feeling. Maybe you saw the recent *New Yorker* cartoon. Noah and his wife standing on the bow of the ark, several of the animals in pairs, of course, perched or standing around the deck. Noah turns to his wife who has a gloomy look on her face and says, "We needed the rain."

But sometimes the sea seems big and you want it to stop raining. We've had our share of cloud bursts this summer. Beloved member Pog Swift's death. A long-time member of our congregation said to me, "Pog was the finest human being I have ever known." That kind of sums it up. Carol's father Lee Timmerman's final days with us the last six months have been profoundly meaningful but hard.

Our city faces political wrangling and racial tensions over the Common Council downsizing. Not to mention the stock market's machinations. Sometimes the sea seems big and you just want it to stop raining.

I don't mean to start out on this beautiful summer Sunday complaining about the weather. But it occurs to me we might take one of these precious summer Sunday mornings, in this exquisite sanctuary, in the special company of friends – that we might take this chance to step back and reflect a bit on God's grace at difficult times.

Still waters run deep they say and I invite you in the stillness of this Sabbath, apart from the busyness of your work or play last week or the week to come, I invite you to let Sabbath rest calm and heal and comfort you as God intended.

Our readings today, Psalm 46 and Jesus calming the storm are the deep waters, the safe harbor in which we each one individually and all of us together can anchor our lives.

I would suggest we need some such harbor, some eternal verities to anchor ourselves individually and as a community because left to our own devices we will either toss like a cork on the sea or go down like the Titanic.

Tossing like a cork with the times. Perhaps you saw the article Carol pointed out to me from the *Buffalo News* business section. "24/7 Demands: Stay Connected On Your Vacation."

"Do you really want to enjoy your summer vacation?" asks James E. Challenger the author. "Then keep your cell phone handy and stay on top of those e-mails. In a fiercely competitive global economy, no one can afford to be out of touch....My advice:" offers Challenger, "take your cell phone, laptop, pager and handheld electronic organizer wherever you vacation. Have a fax installed in your hotel room, check your voice mail through every vacationing day, bring extra batteries for your laptop."¹

I'm not saying you might not have to contact the office while you're on vacation. But think about the implication of Challenger's advice: work is more important than anything else you do, don't unplug or turn off the switch, in other words never rest.

The man should be reported to the Better Business Bureau, his license taken away. The word the Bible uses for Mr. Challenger's view of work is "idolatry." Tossing with the times.

The other danger is we'll simply collide with some rocky shoal or tip of an iceberg. The waters we're sailing these days are treacherous. Shaken confidence in the American economy. International tribal disputes. The illusive al Qaeda. Reports about plans for an invasion of Iraq.

I recently quoted John Buchanan pastor of Fourth Presbyterian, Chicago in the wake of September 11th. Let me do so again. He puts his finger on the task before us, "I do not believe as some do that 'we brought 9/11 on ourselves,'" he said, "that American political and moral foibles resulted in us 'getting what we deserved,' not at all. But I do believe that we should not excuse ourselves too quickly from a painful but needed period of national introspection."ⁱⁱ

There is strong precedent to do this. To observe the Sabbath and use our faith to navigate tough times. The founding fathers called for national days of prayer during the Revolution. Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War on a bleak December day from the steps of the Capitol at his second inaugural said, "the dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves and then we shall save our country."ⁱⁱⁱ

Sometimes it helps knowing others have sailed the same waters. Not just the founding fathers and Lincoln. The writer of Psalm 46 and Jesus himself in today's story also faced difficult moments. Moments that required taking the long view, reconnecting with God's purpose and vision for human life.

When the psalmist says, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble," the situation for Israel was dire. The Assyrian army surrounded Jerusalem poised to descend upon and destroy it.

What makes this psalm great is while the writer sees the transitory nature of human institutions and world events he also affirms the sovereignty and safe haven of God. That's what I'm inviting us to do today.

Nor are things going well for those disciples. Matthew's story is set in the context of some people who want to follow Jesus – but each with different reasons why they cannot follow him just now. Each with excuses. Each with other business to tend to.

Jesus says in effect there will be no good time when everything is just right.

When discipleship will seem easy. When you don't have anything tugging at you.

Follow me, he says, and Matthew reports they got into a boat and set sail.

The sea was probably Galilee which like Erie can kick up a storm quickly.

I remember being out there with Ed and Carol Stevens on a blustery day.

I'm glad Ed had some crackers and ginger ale on board.

But there's another dimension to this tale of Jesus with his disciples in the boat when a fierce storm comes up and everybody is scared stiff. The ancient church Matthew was writing to was just then starting to think of itself as a boat of all things. It may be the earliest symbol for the Christian community.

An interesting choice don't you think? To set foot in a boat you have to believe in something – the vessel, the crew, the skipper. Faith makes the whole thing work. In those days the Romans had everybody under their thumb. Christians were considered rabble-rousers, a threat to the peace. They were treated harshly not just by the state but also by the religious authorities. You see their little boat was getting tossed around on the big sea of first century social and political forces.

We have an arch over this chancel. Ten years ago when the sanctuary was restored someone discovered artwork beneath the gold leaf that covered the arch – the signs of the martyrs. The instruments of death used to execute the first followers of Jesus. It is a reminder discipleship is serious. No wonder some never find the right time to follow him.

So there they are out there in their little boat on the big sea. It's raining and storming. I love Honore Daumier's painting of Matthew's story – the waves like mountains cresting over the little vessel. Disciples fore and aft in a frenzy. Angles of water and craft at odds. You almost get seasick looking at it. But just below the center of the painting to the right is Jesus stretched out in the stern with his head on a soft pillow sleeping like a baby. It is what gives the painting its focus and center and stability. An aura I daresay of serenity.^{iv}

Given who he is they are reluctant to wake him. Restful sleep is like money in the bank. And given what he just said, "foxes have holes and birds have nests but the son of man has no where to lay his head," what with his exhaustion and everyone after him all the time those disciples are reluctant to wake him.

Finally, they cannot help themselves. They blurt out, "Lord save us we are perishing!" Do you recognize the words? We say them every time we are at the Lord's Table, celebrating Holy Communion. Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy." You see we are those disciples, rocked in the boat, calling out, "Lord save us."

Save us Lord from the trials and tribulations of our private lives and our national life. Save us from the loneliness of grief, from the ravages of illness. Save us from the pitfalls of living out our days in a world that even on a sunny morning like this one in the quiet beauty of Western New York can still carry with it the threat of death and destruction.

And he said to them, "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?" then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea and there was a dead calm. I prefer the older translation "and the winds and the sea obeyed him." It conveys the deeper truth that Jesus is not just Lord of human life but Lord of creation.

You see there's the point today. No matter how tumultuous our times there is One who brings peace. In our changing world there is One who does not change, who is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. Madison Ave. hates this. Nothing new to market. Just the same old, eternal truth. As true when it was written four thousand years ago as it is today, "God is our refuge and strength a very present help in trouble."

Perhaps some of you know the writer Reynolds Price. Back in 1994 he published his memoir, *A Whole New Life*. In it he recounts his prolonged battle with spinal cancer and the miraculous healing that allowed him, though his legs remained paralyzed, to return to a productive life.

In 1997, Price received a letter from a stranger, a young man in his mid-thirties who had been forced to withdraw from medical school by the recurrence of a cancer that would soon take his life.

The young man, Jim, asks Price a question many of us have asked, at a time he was forced to confront his own mortality. "I want to believe in a God who cares," he says "because I may meet him sooner than I had expected. I think I am at the point where I can accept the existence of a God (otherwise I can't explain the origin of the universe), but I can't yet believe he cares about us."^v

Price's response, a classic statement of Christian apology or argument for God, will surely rank in its eloquence with those of Pascal or Kierkegaard or Lewis.

Price says this, he says, "Surely God works and watches, in some sense from love... or the ideal lover's feeling for the beloved – an emotion which St. Augustine defines in the words *Volo ut sis*, 'I will you to be,' or 'I want you to be who you are.'

"I don't claim certainty for much else I've said," says Price to the young man, "but that claim feels like firm ground to me. And it would take more strength than I have to deny Eliot's assertion at the end of the *Four Quartets* that 'all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.' Or Bach's final moment in the B Minor Mass when glorious horns begin to bloom then flood the abyss beneath the choir's 'Give us peace'. Or Dante's hard-earned vision at the end of his *Comedy* that the 'scattered leaves of all the universe' are gathered inward at last and bound together in one volume by love."^{vi}

Sometimes when a pillar of our community dies or when a loved one struggles to die; sometimes when our work seems to surround us like an ocean with no end in sight or our family or city or nation is negotiating rocky reefs and perilous shoals; sometimes when our church pitches against the swelling seas of controversy...sometimes O Lord, our boat seems so small and the sea so large.

But the Bible today says take heart. It is not the size of your ship nor the strength of the storm...rather this deep and simple truth in which to anchor your life and which we are charged today to pass on to Katherine and her generation: those who follow Jesus are neither alone nor without a protector.

Though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam...He is our refuge and strength. The One who brings peace no matter how troubled your heart or perilous our age. Amen.

