

“THROUGH THE STORM”

Job 28:20-28; Luke 8:22-25

May 14, 2017 ~ Season of Creation, week 4: Storm

Rev. Janet Robertson Duggins

Westminster Presbyterian Church

About the Job reading: In the middle of a series of longish speeches by friends who come to comfort him – not too successfully or compassionately - after a series of great losses and Job’s responses, there comes this chapter which is a poem on wisdom. It asks where wisdom can be found in the world.

The unusual word “Abaddon” in this passage means the place of the dead.

read Job 28:20-28.

Although as time passes, many memories get hazy or forgotten altogether, I find, when I think about it, that I’ve kept quite a lot of “storm” memories:

A thunderstorm in the desert.



A tropical storm that churned up the ocean and whipped the palm trees.



A long drive at night with a skyshow of cloud-to-cloud lightning.



An ice storm that was destructive but magically, sparkingly beautiful.



The brief but violent windstorm that blew down a 40 ft. tree in our yard and took off part of the fellowship hall roof.



An unusual November rain followed by a double rainbow that painted the sky with glowing colors.



It feels to me like every storm has its own characteristics – a kind of individuality, almost personality. Something at any rate, makes storms memorable to us. Maybe it's that same something that's always made human beings feel that God is present in a storm, maybe even speaking through a storm.

In scripture, God's presence is sometimes indicated by a cloud, or by thunder and lightning, as at Mount Sinai when God gave the commandments to Moses and the people. The Psalmist writes of God, "You make the clouds your chariots, you ride on the wings of the wind and you make the winds your messengers." (Psalm 104:3-4) In storms, we are aware of God's power, we realize that the mystery of God is beyond our understanding, we sometimes may even sense God's wrath.



Maybe it's that same something that makes storms so powerfully symbolic for us. "Storm" is a metaphorical way of talking about unrest and coming change, about trouble and danger and risk. When several bad things happen at once we say that it was "a perfect storm." We talk about the winds of change, or a "sea change." When life happens too fast, we say it's been a whirlwind. We may say that a relationship is stormy. We talk about being "swamped" or "overwhelmed." We say, "it never rains but it pours."

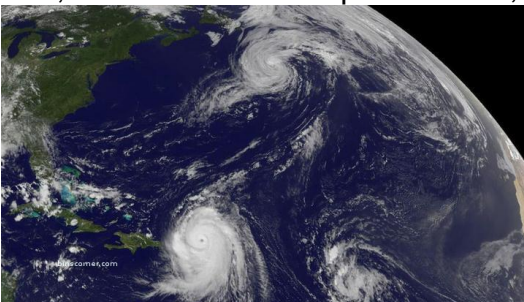
Many of us will say that we enjoy a good storm.



We can feel that way when we're able to observe from a place of safety. We may feel in awe of the power unleashed in a storm, enthralled by its movement or energy, sometimes dazzled by beauty. Yet our metaphors reveal that we know storms pose danger and bring fear as well.



Yes, storms are natural phenomena, integral to the Earth's weather patterns.



They are the necessary consequences of physical forces acting on the Earth – such as the Earth’s turning or the sun’s heat. Storms are nature’s way of refreshing and renewing the earth. Ecosystems are nourished and sustained by storms and floods and cyclones. In many parts of the world, people and cultures understand this and have learned to live with storms, even celebrating the cycles of storms and their effect on the land. (Habel et.al., p. 205)

But storms can be dangerous and destructive.



People lose their homes, their livelihoods. They get hurt. People die – sometimes many people.

Often there’s just no predicting or preventing. We are reminded that the world can be dangerous and unpredictable. But then, we can also see how the destructive potential of many storms is realized largely because people have put themselves, or been put, in the path of danger:

Communities situated in floodplains



Trailer parks in tornado-prone areas
Houses and resorts on coastlines



Structurally unsound buildings in earthquake zones
Hiking or boating in defiance of weather advisories



Emergency plans that are inadequate or impossible to implement for a large population. Development and other human activity that's altered coastlines and terrain and climate and weather patterns ...



The results are often tragic. We call them "disasters,"



and they inevitably impact the poor and the vulnerable the most,



those with the fewest choices and options for escape.

So storms sometimes find us standing in awe of God's greatness, and sometimes asking God, "why?" or "where were You?" Those questions aren't unlike the questions the book of Job poses. They are questions that essentially admit that there's a lot we don't understand about the mind of God, the workings of the world, and what we human beings ought to be doing.



Our reading from Job asks, "where can understanding be found?"

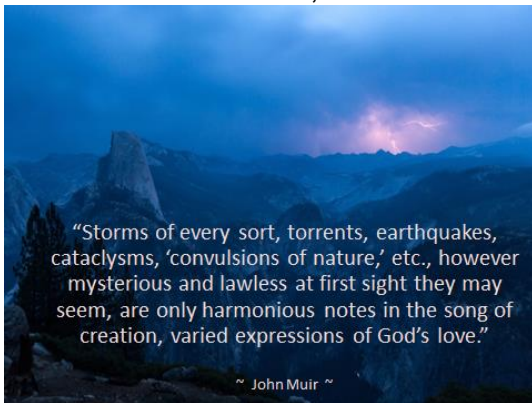
The answer, from the writer of the poem, whomever he may have been, is that human beings don't have it, and neither do other living creatures. The dead do not find wisdom in the world beyond this life. Only God knows wisdom. The poem seems to say that God is both the source of wisdom and that wisdom somehow is "discovered" or uncovered in the phenomena that are part of God's creation – winds, water, rain, and lightning.



It's not easy for us to see the "wisdom" of these phenomena - how they work and how they are part of the underlying design of nature. It's not any easier for us to discern how to live within this order, how not to disrupt it, how to protect it *and* protect the human communities within it. It's hard to come to grips with the reality that the Earth and all its elements transcend us human beings. (p. 212). The Earth's systems have a reality of their own that is

not in reference to humans but to the life of the Earth itself. We depend on that. But we also sometimes get in the way of it.

John Muir once wrote,



“Storms of every sort, torrents, earthquakes, cataclysms, ‘convulsions of nature,’ etc., however mysterious and lawless at first sight they may seem, are only harmonious notes in the song of creation, varied expressions of God’s love.”

We may sometimes want to argue with Muir about that. Even though we may agree in theory that God loves the Earth, our confidence in God’s love rests on God’s love for *us*, and is shaken by human suffering.



Perhaps that’s why we have the gospel story of Jesus being with his friends in a storm and protecting them. Perhaps the cross belongs at the heart of every natural disaster – reminder that Jesus suffers with those who suffer. Perhaps we are supposed to be God’s love when such things happen. I don’t know. I just know that God’s wisdom is bigger than ours, as the Earth is bigger than us.

Both Job’s wisdom poem and Luke’s story of Jesus with his disciples on a stormy lake stress not merely divine power, but the divine wisdom that understands the ways of the Earth, including the phenomena of storms. Both these stories invite us to trust that wisdom at the point where our own understanding of the mysteries fails.

A storm can be a fearsome thing. A storm can also be a gift.



A storm recalls us to humility, dashes our illusions of control and puts us in our place, lets us know that there are forces at work on our planet that have nothing to do with our convenience or needs... and yet at the same time calls forth our praise.

A storm is an invitation to persist in the search for wisdom; about God's nature, about the interconnectedness of all life on earth, about how best to live our lives and how best to live on this planet.



A storm is an occasion to recall God's presence with us, even when life is literally or metaphorically stormy. God is there in the power and energy of the storm, creating, recreating, inspiring. God is with us, sharing our fear, grieving our losses with us, and offering us a foothold and peace in the midst of every storm.

Resources

Our National Parks John Muir, 1901

The Season of Creation: a preaching commentary. Norman C. Habel, David Rhoads, and Paul Santmire, eds., 2011

“If we surrendered
to earth's intelligence
we could rise up rooted, like trees.”

~ Rainer Maria Rilke (*Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*)