

Theme: When Storms Ravage Places of Peace: What Then?

Readings: Genesis 2:4b-9, 15-25, Luke 8:22-25, Acts 27:33-44

So there was this ancient Greek philosopher from long before the time of Jesus named Heraclitus. And one day he told a story about a ship. And there are multiple versions of this story but this is the one I originally learnt. A wooden ship leaves the port of Athens on a very long voyage. Unfortunately this ship is plagued by disaster and bad luck. It's attacked by pirates, ravaged by storms, and is damaged by general wear and tear. Every time it arrives in a new port it has to have extensive repairs and parts replaced. If it helps you to visualise it, pretend that the ship was originally painted entirely green and that all the new parts and pieces are red. Now a curious thing has happened by the time the ship has completed its voyage by returning to Athens: every single piece of the ship has been replaced. The all-green ship is now entirely red - not an inch of green is on the ship. So Heraclitus poses the question: is the ship that arrived home in Athens the same ship that left Athens?

Now if there's one thing sailors have historically feared it's storms at sea. To ensure a safe voyage the ancient Greeks would sometimes drown a horse as a sacrifice to Poseidon, god of the sea, earthquakes, and for some reason, horses. Whistling on a ship may get you yelled at by more superstitious sailors as it's believed that to whistle on a ship is to challenge the wind itself - and the wind will respond by conjuring up a storm. Apparently the one exception to this rule is that the cook is allowed to whistle because if you can hear the cook whistling you know that he's not stuffing his face with food. And it's not hard to see why these superstitions to avoid storms became so popular when you consider the awesome destructive power of a storm. In Act 1 of *The Tempest*, William Shakespeare writes:

*"If by your art, my dearest father, you have
Put the wild waters in this roar, allay them.
The sky, it seems, would pour down stinking pitch,
But that the sea, mounting to the welkin's cheek,
Dashes the fire out. O, I have suffered
With those that I saw suffer: a brave vessel,
Who had, no doubt, some noble creature in her,
Dash'd all to pieces. O, the cry did knock
Against my very heart. Poor souls, they perish'd.
Had I been any god of power, I would*

*Have sunk the sea within the earth or ere
It should the good ship so have swallow'd and
The fraughting souls within her.”¹*

Those of you who are familiar with Anglican history might know about the time the self-confessed “Great Blasphemer” John Newton was caught out at sea in a storm that lasted 11 days. Exhausted and having lost all hope, on March 21, 1748, Newton cried out to God for deliverance from the storm. He would later pen the famous hymn Amazing Grace about surviving that storm. It’s actually my favourite hymn and I have the words to it on a cross hanging up in my bedroom. I can’t hear the words of that hymn without feeling deeply moved.

And it’s kinda funny how someone’s terrifying storm can result in a song that brings so many people comfort and peace. Why is that?

First we need to understand what peace in the Bible is. When the Old Testament talks about peace it uses the word *shalom*. Shalom means peace, harmony, wholeness, prosperity, and flourishing. We might say that it’s a state in which “all is as it should be”. And we see this in the second Genesis creation narrative as it focuses on Eden. And it says that the fields of the earth were devoid of plants and fields, there had been no rain, and curiously no one to till the ground. That final one seems like an odd detail to mention? No one to till the earth? I don’t know if I’ve ever taught on this in a sermon here at Holy Trinity - but some may have heard me teach on this at other events - there’s a crucial difference between how the ancient Hebrews thought and how we think. Afterall, there’s a few thousand years difference between our cultures. As modern Westerners we would say something exists because it has a physical presence, for example we know this pulpit exists because I’m leaning on it and praying that it doesn’t fall down again. But the Hebrews thought of existence in terms of function - if something didn’t have a function it didn’t exist. We might express this by thinking of a startup company- at what point does the company begin to exist? When it has a building with the company name in big letters on the front? Or when the employees move in and start the work of running the business? The Hebrews would say the latter. And so in the second Genesis narrative the earth doesn’t exist in a strange sense. And so God places a man on the earth and in a garden for him to till it. Now both the earth and man have a function.

¹ Shakespeare, “The Tempest,” *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, Act 1, Scene 2, lines 1-13.

And then the animals are brought before the man and he is given the task of naming them. Again, in Ancient Hebrew thought something doesn't function until you have a name. Giving something a name is a creation act and so God is entrusting Adam to act as a co-creator. But none of the animals are a suitable companion for the man.

Now on a side note: When I noticed that Ian Smith had put me down to preach on Genesis 2 I asked him if he knew what he had done. After all, I'm a big believer in understanding the Genesis creation narratives in relation to the other creation narratives of the Ancient Near East. To this he responded "Oh good, I hope you bring up some comparisons with the Gilgamesh Epic then". And so just for you, Ian, I am going to point out that yes there are many similarities between the figure of Adam in the Hebrew creation narrative and the figure of Enkidu in the Sumerian creation narrative. Both are formed from the earth, both are naked and unaware, and both are amongst animals but are not animals. However, there are also important distinctions between the two figures that serve to make a point. The one I want to focus on is man's relationship to women. Enkidu is portrayed as a wild man living with the beasts until he meets the woman Shamhat who seduces him and over the course of 6 nights civilises and clothes him. Eve in contrast, is created alongside Adam. And it says that God put Adam into a deep sleep and took a rib from him to create a woman. Or maybe not. John Walton, an evangelical Old Testament and Ancient Near Eastern literature scholar, points out that the word we translate as rib is never used to indicate ribs in ancient Hebrew.² Instead it's an architectural term that means side, more specifically it refers to one of a pair of items in the tabernacle/temple. So it's likely that the passage is talking about God splitting Adam right down the middle and making the woman from one side of his body. Lovely. But whatever picture you wish to take, the point is that man and woman are equal with each other in their work as co-creators and stewards of God's creation. And so we have a picture of a place of peace, of shalom, where everything is as it should be.

But as we all know, this peace wouldn't last. Chaos enters the garden in the form of a serpent and tempts Adam and Eve of eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They decided to shortcut their way to the knowledge that God intended for them to have in time before they were ready and in doing so they were cast out into the chaos of the world around them.

² John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2-3 and the Human Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2015), 77-78.

In the Gospel reading Jesus and his disciples set out on the Sea of Galilee, technically a lake, when suddenly the weather takes a turn for the worse. The winds pick up, causing the boat to fill with water. And I've been on the Sea of Galilee and I can understand why that would be scary. And I was on a nice modern boat and not a rickety boat like this. And so the disciples run over to Jesus who somehow is sleeping through all of this and start shouting at him. "Wake up! We're going to die!" And with a word Jesus silences the storm and everything goes calm. "Where is your faith?" He asks his disciples. Now it doesn't say this but I sometimes like to imagine that he just rolled over and went back to sleep as if calming a storm was as mundane as waking up at 5am to let the cat out. And his disciples are left asking each other who this man who commands the winds and water so that they obey him.

Now the chances are that when you or someone else was going through a storm in life a well meaning Christian told you this story in an effort to cheer you up. Remember that time Jesus' disciples were caught in a storm and he just stopped the storm and saved them from it completely? Now I'm not saying that God doesn't save people from storms, but let's face it, if God always saved us from storms this would be the shortest sermon in history. Sometimes God lets us go through storms. And I think that to tell people that if they just had more faith God would remove them from the storm is not just unbiblical theology, but harmful theology. To tell someone that the reason they are suffering through their illness, their depression, their family crisis, losing their job, is because they don't have enough faith is a deeply soul-crushing thing to tell someone.

As I started planning this sermon I realised I had to confront the fact that I went through a pretty bad storm last December. I won't go into details but I had my heart broken in a pretty painful breakup that came out of the blue. I felt like the rug had been pulled out from under my feet.

I was lying awake at 4am that night trying to find some solace in listening to sermons on YouTube and I stumbled on one by an American pastor called TD Jakes. And he said something that really hit home for me:

"Stop grieving over the boat. The boat did not retain its original form. And I'm going to zero in, I'm going to put an arrow right in the heart of many of your problems: you're in love with what you had and you think that if your life does not retain the shape that you started with

you don't think it can get you where you're going. See, the boat didn't cease to exist, it just took on another form. It wasn't as comfortable, it wasn't as glorious, but the Bible said even when life takes on another form and it's all broken into a piece, grab a piece of what you have left and hold on..."³

Powerful stuff. And that's what we see Paul doing in the Acts reading. Paul's ship is docked at Fair Havens on his journey to Rome. But they know that they cannot spend the Winter at Fair Havens so they cast off at the first sign of a gentle southwind - perfect conditions for sailing the mediterranean. However, and how often do we feel like there's a however waiting around the corner when life is going well, the mediterranean is also home to the *gregale* - a violent northeasterly wind. And this wind batters the ship ferociously and the crew are busy draping ropes under the hull to try to keep it together when they are faced with a horrifying realisation - they are being blown towards an area of water called the *Syrtis*. The *Syrtis* struck terror into the hearts of sailors because its shallows and sandbars had claimed many ships. Sailors would avoid the area even during calm weather. And Paul and his fellow sailors are being driven towards it by a ferocious storm that would batter the ship for 14 days. They see land and decide that their best bet for survival is to sail the ship into a sheltered bay and drag the ship out of the water. But crack! Their worst fears are realised and they ran aground on a sandbar and the ship starts to break up. The ship could no longer take them the rest of the journey. The soldiers want to kill the prisoners but their centurion stopped them and ordered those who could swim to swim to shore. Those who could not swim were to hold onto whatever pieces of the ship were floating and to drift ashore.

Paul and the centurion realise that they no longer need the whole boat to survive, they just need to grab onto whatever floats and let themselves be carried to safety. But sometimes we're in love with how the boat was and we're trying to hold onto it. Waves are crashing against it and water is flowing in and we're desperately trying to keep the hull together with duct tape and cable ties. One of the planks is rotten and falling off and we're straining trying to keep hold of it with all our strength because we don't want the ship to lose its shape. And it's understandable that we cling to this. Afterall, the ship has gotten us this far, hasn't it? But the ship ain't fit to sail anymore. And we're exhausted because we are plotting ways of getting the past back because we think we can't survive unless we have the whole ship.

³ TD Jakes, "Being Heartbroken You Will Heal," YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ndkH6WvWfwY>.

The week after my break up I was praying with a friend and I told him that I felt like I was dead in the water and I didn't have the strength to swim to shore. And he told me that while he had been praying for me he had received an image of a boat lost at sea whose captain needed to trust God that He'd guide him to shore. And I grabbed onto whatever was left of my boat and prayed I would make it to shore. And that looked like grabbing onto family, wise and caring friends, and my faith. They reminded me that I was loved and lovable when I couldn't see that about myself. And there was one verse I kept coming back to time and time again: Psalm 61:2: When my heart is overwhelmed lead me to the rock that is higher than I.

The shape of our boat will change as we go through life. Our boat is not going to look the same at age 60 that it did at age 6. As we go through life and its storms we will lose parts of our boat. We will lose friends, lovers, people we trust will fail us and we will fail others. We will lose jobs, our health, and even family. We might have to say goodbye to futures we had pictured but that we now know will never happen. It may be saying goodbye to the future we had pictured with someone. It may be saying goodbye to the dream of having kids. At times it will feel like the waves are 20 foot tall and will pulverise us. We may feel like every doubt and fear we had repressed for so long are now circling around us like sharks waiting to devour us. But hold on to whatever is still floating and will keep you afloat. When people are drowning we instinctively start grabbing for things to keep us afloat. Our bodies have all these wonderful survival mechanisms built in to keep us alive. But we need to make sure what we grab onto will keep us afloat. It might be a good friend, it might be your church family, it might be the only thing you have left is Jesus but hold on. In our darkest moments it might even just be the resolution to see one more day. It doesn't matter if you only have one plank you can hold onto. You can float on one plank. Just grab onto it. Let people care for you and support you. Allow yourself to weep with them. Go to a counsellor if you need it. There's no shame in having a professional help you navigate the storm.

And I'm not trying to wrap up the topic of suffering through storms in a neat little package with a bow. I don't believe in doing that. Life is incredibly messy even without storms. And everyone's storms look different and our ways of coping with those storms are different too. I'm not here to give you a 12 step program for solving your problems. Instead I want to encourage you.

You will get through the storm and your ship can be rebuilt! It may look quite different. The rudder may not function as well as it used to. Or it might function better. The storm may have

stripped away parts of our life that were hindering us. It might be that our ship ends up with better sails as we learn how to navigate through life a bit wiser. We might even paint gnarly racing flame decals on the side of our boat! But the point is that our boat won't stay the same as we go through life and sometimes it won't feel like we have much boat left. But the boat can be rebuilt.

And as for me, I'm currently doing just that.