

“He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”

Today we will explore the difference between saying “there is nothing to be afraid of” and “Do not be afraid.”

At first this seems like a contradiction in terms. In theory when we say that there is nothing to be afraid of we are saying that our fears are irrational, which if you have ever been on the receiving end of such so-called reassurance, is never that reassuring. “Do not be afraid” on the other hand is meant to help us face our legitimate fears. Our readings tell us that chaos is everywhere and that we have good reason to be afraid AND God tells us AND Jesus tells us, to have faith, not to be afraid.

We hear Jesus calm the wind and the sea in front of his terrified disciples, we hear God speak to Job from the whirlwind, we hear our psalmist praise God for rescue from several kinds of danger (although we only read about the sea) and even Paul as he describes his perseverance through afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, and hunger demonstrate why we should not be afraid. Even in the middle of chaos, God’s grace is there for us if we ask for it and it is to our benefit because we cannot save ourselves.

As human beings we are always struggling to combat the forces of chaos, whether it’s the chaos created by nature: the weather, the drought and wildfires in the west, the hurricanes that are becoming more fierce and more frequent, the tides that shift and change our shoreline, and the movement of tectonic plates, or the dynamics of our relationships with each other. We keep deluding ourselves that we can ignore or manage the former and try to control the latter by passing laws. And you know how successful that has been! We passed a law against just over 150 years ago and it took another hundred to make segregation illegal but racism is still a problem. We granted women the right to hold and inherit property and to vote but the #MeToo movement indicates that we have still not achieved equality. We have changed laws that prohibited same sex relationships, we have recognized same sex marriage, but the Supreme Court has just ruled that it is permissible to discriminate in certain commercial transactions. And don’t let me get started on the insanity of defending our borders by separating children from their parents and then losing track of where they have been imprisoned.

Not only can’t we legislate for ourselves, we consistently underestimate the complexity of God’s creation. We are not in control. Our limited ability to impose order on chaos is at the heart of God’s response to Job in the whirlwind. Job had based his life on the understanding that life is fair; if you work hard, wash behind your ears and obey the law nothing bad will happen to you. We do the same: If you are reasonably healthy you won’t get cancer, if you know your job and contribute you won’t be fired, you won’t be assaulted if you dress modestly, you won’t be betrayed by someone who has promised to love, honor, and cherish you.

What a crock!

But we so want to believe that there is order in the chaos that even when we know “bad things happen to good people” our first instinct is to blame the victim. That’s what Job’s “friends” tried to do and all they did was piss Job off. He swears that he has done nothing wrong and demands an accounting from God. Job wants God to answer him according to the “law” as he understands it. Frankly it’s a good thing that Job never learned the reason that he had to suffer was because of a bet that God had with his messenger Ha Satan that Job could be made to curse God. But God doesn’t explain this to Job, instead God blows him away. God exposes Job to the overwhelming complexities of God’s control over the forces of chaos and that chaos is a part of the created world. Job admits he did not understand and withdraws his charges.

I liken the impact of chaos on creation to the free will given to human beings. Chaos causes all kinds of destruction but it has also contributed to the astounding diversity of our natural environment, its beauty, its power, its fertility, and its grandeur. Free will gives us the opportunity to transform our lives to choose to follow God freely or to sin.

God’s response to Job is similar to that of the parent who responds to a child’s question “because I say so!” Not at all satisfactory from a logical perspective but if the parent has the child’s best interests at heart it helps us to trust that in God’s time God will make all things well. Jesus trusted in God was able to sleep in an open boat in the middle of a raging tempest so that when his disciples awakened him in terror and he could rebuke the wind and sea by saying “Peace, be still.” Presumably he then went back to sleep.

Would that our prayers were always answered to our immediate satisfaction. Would that you who have lost those you loved have received a miracle. Would that you who prayed for healing be made well. Would that you who have been betrayed or hurt would be vindicated. Job’s encounter with God in the whirlwind is a great story. God doesn’t answer Job’s question but God also scolds Job’s “friends” for their lack of support thereby vindicating Job’s position and in a fairytale ending God gives back to Job more than he had had before. But we all know that life doesn’t usually work that way and it’s a hard sell for most of us. “Do not be afraid.” But there is much to fear.

On the other hand there is good news. God recognized that for human beings fear is the default reaction to chaos and that in spite of the active presence of God throughout the history of Israel sin and failure were more prevalent than faith. And so God became incarnate. Jesus came and lived amongst the forces of chaos. Jesus lived amidst the oppressive cruelties of the Roman Empire, the corruption of the Jewish leaders, and the fickle crowds who hailed him in one moment and called for his death in the next. Yes, Jesus exposed himself to the forces of chaos and human as he was, he was not broken. Fear could not break him and death could not hold him. Sin could not shame him; instead Jesus rose from the dead, breaking those bonds of sin and death. Jesus broke the bonds of sin and death not just for one man, not just for the men and women who came to know and to love him but for all of us whom he has blessed. Even though we have not seen, we have come to believe that God “so loved the world that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”(John 3:16)

There is much of which to be afraid in this world, powers and forces beyond our control. Even when we put forth our best efforts we create other problems. Chaos thrives on the evil

that human beings inflict on each other deliberately or through ignorance or indifference. God's answer to us when we confront the vicissitudes of life is same as God's answer to Job. What does this mean? It means that we have to be willing to trust in God's grace and when we do so we will be able to endure our fears.

I conclude with the words from one of our hymns for today: "Be not afraid. I go before you always. Come follow me; I will give you rest."

Amen