

Stilling the Storms of Life
Sunday, June 21, In the Year of Our LORD, 2009
First Congregational United Church of Christ
Gloversville, New York
The Rev. Ralph S. English, Pastor

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

There are storms and there are *storms*!

This past Monday's hail storm shredded the leaves of many of our plants at home – some of the leaves look as though they were hit with a shotgun blast! There were small piles of hail along Route 29. Turning on the Weather Station at home, I expected some news of our hail storm – but the shovel-able hail in New Jersey and the golf ball sized hail in Kansas was clearly a better definition of a *storm* than that which we experienced. The raw video of softball-sized hail hitting a car in North Carolina clearly reminded me that our hail, in the grand scheme of things, was not that big a deal.

Thinking of the relative meekness of our storm when compared to the tornados, floods, and far more severe hail experienced in other parts of the country reminded me of a three line phrase composed by The Rev. Charles Swindoll – “Comparisons are odious,” his theory being that it does us little good to compare ourselves to others or, by inference in this instance, to compare ones experience if not misery to that of another.

A confession: proof I am not above bias and prejudice is wrought of thinking of The Rev. Charles Swindoll, knowing he is an evangelical radio preacher from Plano, Texas, and knowing that there are at least three prejudice triggers for me in that characterization. While the word “evangelical” in and of itself simply means “to preach the good news,” we know that in our culture that word has been appropriated by the religious right to not only claim one true way to proclaim the “good news,” but to do so in a way that is pejorative towards anyone who claims the “good news” is more inclusive than how all too they think. The bottom line is that many radio preachers are likewise more likely to be judgmental and bombastic (look, I said this was a prejudice!) and Plano, Texas? Nothing like bringing out the worst of my biases, as there are undoubtedly many good people in Plano, Texas!

My prejudice notwithstanding, that phrase, “comparisons are odious” comes from a wonderful – yes wonderful – book by Charles Swindoll entitled “Killing Giants, Pulling Thorns.” In the context of “there are storms and then there are storms,” Mr. Swindoll distinguishes between those storms that are more like giants and those nagging ones that are more like thorns. I think him correct in realizing that as we examine what it means to still the storms of our lives, the first step is to name them.

Mr. Swindoll's giants: fear, bitterness, jealousy, lust, depression, loneliness, resentment, grief, pain, procrastination and rumor. In brief synopsis, Mr. Swindoll writes:

Giants – Big things. Things that buffet, bluster ... and defy domination. Dark things. Ominous shadows that blight, blacken ... and blot out the Son (as in S-o-n)

(Certainly the fear the disciples experienced out on that boat could be described that way – and as that storm blocked out the s-u-n, so did it block out the guidance and grace of the S-o-n.)

Then there are the thorns: comparison, expectations (those we have of ourselves or that we have of others), pessimism, habits (presumably the lesser ones), cliches, superstition, busyness, erosion, apprehension, impatience (knew that one would make its way into one of the lists) and Pharisaism (the claim of being a know-it-all – or know-it-better). In this instance, Mr. Swindoll writes:

Thorns – Little things. Things that prick, penetrate ... and progressively poison. Unexpected things. Low-lying vines that trip, tangle ... and eventually imprison.

I struggled with some hymns this week. The hymn we will sing after this message (and, despite the apparently obligatory asterisk that Nancy puts next to the word "hymn," I really would prefer that we ignore the asterisk and remain seated for its singing) – speaks, at the end of the second stanza to how faith would still the waves and wind that are controlled of God. Before I settled on hymn "Be Still, My Soul," I kept turning to hymns 171 and 172 in our hymnal which have the same words set to different melodies, "Jesus Calls Us, o'er the Tumult." Although the message of the words of that hymn were close, it wasn't quite there, and I was not inclined to rewrite all of the words of a hymn as I am prone to do for single stanzas of hymns to be sung as introits or doxologies.

Wouldn't you know it, the words I was seeking were right there in front of me as I opened the worship bulletin at yesterday's Service of Commissioning and Installation of Marcia Tolman for Christian Ministry in Education at Emmanuel Friedens Church in Schenectady. Listen to these words to the traditional tune of "Jesus Calls Us O'er the Tumult" as composed by The Rev.

Maren Tirabassi:

Jesus calls us o'er the tumult, of the storms we all must face –
need for hope or need for healing find an answer in His grace.
Jesus calls us to transition, finding ways to care for church –
being stewards, loving strangers, called to faith and honest search.
Jesus calls us when the changes make us fight, complain or hide –
call us forth to share the gospel, cast our nets on the deeper side.
Jesus calls us and we listen; Jesus asks, we take a chance,
Jesus washes and we glisten, walks on water and we dance.

Now for the way this sermon began when I began its composition earlier this week: There are storms and there are *storms*.

The Book of Job God, but could we not spend five weeks exploring its depths and messages! A couple of points for today: first and foremost is the affirmation that anyone who speaks of the “patience of Job” has not read the Book of Job. Historians and theologians are not really sure where to put the “blame” (if you want to use that word) for calling Job patient – for he is, frankly, anything but. Another error is to assume that the Book of Job is about that timeless question of theodicy, as to why bad things happen to good people (although bad things *do* happen to a presumably good person, namely Job). Frankly, the Book of Job is about arrogance, the arrogance of Job and his so called friends who give him all kinds of unsolicited advice as to the why of his misfortune; the arrogance, and it takes a *very* long time for a careful reader of the Book of Job to get this message straight – the arrogance of assuming to know the mind of God and to assume that if one demands that God respond to ones inquiry one will get the satisfaction one wants.

Perhaps Mr. Swindoll’s thorns of expectations and impatience come into play when speaking of Job – Job (and his pals) had certain expectations of how the world works, of justice, of what they thought “fair,” – and Job was certainly impatient to get a reply from God – and what June read today was the reply that God finally gave –

The first two verses are these:

Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind” Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?”

Frankly, God’s response to Job is much like Jesus’ to the wind (or is to more than the wind? – we will get to that in a moment) when Jesus, in that flotilla of boats with the disciples, is awakened in the midst of that frightening storm and says “Peace! Be still!”

“Peace! Be Still!” Interestingly, this is the Gospel of Mark – words put down by one of Peter’s followers who is not particularly complimentary towards the disciples. The Gospel of Mark includes many of the foibles and failing of the disciples – usually their inability to get the message of this Jesus straight – Mark spells those out more than the other three rendering of the Good News. I wonder if the disciples got the message correct in this instance. Oh, they heard Jesus correctly – at least partially. Jesus did tell the waves and wind to be calm. “Peace! Be Still!” *was* said to stop the storm – but perhaps it was said to stop *both* storms – the storm of wind and waves – *and the storm that rose its ugly head inside the hearts and souls of the disciples* so frightened of so very much.

“Peace! Be Still!” Often, in our frenzied lives, our we-know-how-life-ought-to-be ness, in our occasional mirroring of Job in our impatience if not out arrogance of thinking we know how God

ought to coordinate our lives (when it suits us – after all, we don't want God interfering *all* of the time!), in our – one of my father's favorite terms was higgledy-piggledy – in our higgledy-piggledy self-created storms born of fear, bitterness, jealousy, lust, depression, ... (Mr. Swindoll's list of giants and thorns) – and yes, higgledy-piggledy is in the dictionary – meaning to run around like a bunch of confused pigs – what we need in our scrambling to make sense of whatever – is for God – in whatever manner works at the time – for God as Creating, Redeeming or Empowering One – to put up a proverbial hand and say “Peace! Be Still!” - to still the waves and storms and to still us.

Oh, that is only a first step, to calm us, to make us stop, take notice of the storms around us – but in stopping perhaps we can then figure out how to address the storms that gather in so many places and in so many ways.

Like Job, I am impatient and I want to have God answer the questions, calm the fears of so many, still the disquieting storms in peoples' lives – from those individuals who face either or both giants and thorns to those who, like the citizens of Iran, face very unknown futures in the wake of a dubious election (how *do* you claim to have counted more than 30 million hand written votes in a just a couple of hours and declare a winner?), ... I want answers to economic upheaval, ... I want answers to how if not why good people suffer and, by inference, why people of lesser character get away with their shenanigans. I don't have the answers. I know I don't need all of the answers. But I, like so many of us, want more answers. I want to be able to stand before you on a Sunday morning and give you more answers, but perhaps even the first step is helpful – when, in the face of our storms, Jesus stops us - Peace! Be Still!

On the page where The Rev. Swindoll speaks of thorns, he quotes Byron:

“The thorns which I have reaped are of the tree I planted;
they have torn me, and I bleed.
I should have known what fruit would spring from such a seed.”

Giants, thorns, storms – and the invitation to know what might bring calm – Peace! Be Still!

Amen.