

## All Saints Talk for 25 February 2024

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### God's Questions: Why are you so afraid?

*Matthew 8v23-27 Jesus Calms the Storm*

*<sup>23</sup> Then he got into the boat and his disciples followed him. <sup>24</sup> Suddenly a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. <sup>25</sup> The disciples went and woke him, saying, "Lord, save us! We're going to drown!"*

*<sup>26</sup> He replied, "You of little faith, why are you so afraid?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm.*

*<sup>27</sup> The men were amazed and asked, "What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!"*

Today we are continuing our sermon series *God's questions* looking at different occasions in the Bible when God himself asks the questions which invite us to reflect on what our response would be today if he were asking us the same thing.

Naomi Pendle brought us into the New Testament last week with Jesus' first question to his disciples: 'what do you want?' which reminds me of the question we often ask in the early weeks of Alpha: 'What are you hoping to get from this course?'

It was John Wimber who said 'people come to church for many reasons, but they stay for only one and that's relationships.' Everyone wants to both know and be known and we all have an inbuilt hunger for connection with the creator. So these are great questions to ask ourselves during this season of Lent.

Well this week's question came in the middle of a crisis. A sudden huge storm threatened to overwhelm the boat which was carrying Jesus and his disciples. They were terrified but somehow Jesus was asleep in the back and when they woke him up panicking he asked 'You of little faith, why are you so afraid?'

Now we know life is unpredictable and hard work at times. Just before this scene in Matthew, Jesus had been ministering to crowds of people in the town of Capernaum with ever more sick and infirm people being brought to him for healing. In his humanity Jesus got tired and needed rest, so he instructed the disciples to prepare a boat to take him across to the other side of the lake. The boat journey would provide a great place of sanctuary for Jesus to rest and recuperate.

But just when you manage to find some peace and quiet and life seems to be ticking along nicely some horrendous storm hits. In this story, literally, it says a 'Mega-gale' arose and Matthew adds that it came *out of nowhere*. The Sea of Galilee lies 680 feet below sea level and sudden storms result from differences in temperatures between the seacoast and the mountains beyond. The storms can come from nowhere, just like the unexpected challenges life chucks at us. Stuff happens, but we need to learn how to react.

The disciples panicked, but Jesus kept sleeping, resting in the back of the boat. Does it ever feel to you like God must be taking a nap when it comes to your situation? Sudden illness or disaster strikes or you lose someone close to you. Perhaps there is yet another restructuring at work. Why does God allowed these things to happen?

Well the disciples felt the same sense of despair: 'Don't you care if we drown?'

Don't you just love the disciples – it is very comforting that they are just like me! Who else tends to catastrophise?

My mind is wired to think through implications. In some ways it is a blessing to be able to picture scenarios and details as this helps with problem solving. But the flip side of that coin is that I tend to dwell on difficulties and worry about outcomes. So the question Jesus posed the disciples in the midst of the storm is sometimes my challenge on a daily basis: 'You of little faith. Why are you afraid?'

Clearly in moments of crisis Jesus is looking for faith instead of fear. But what does that faith look like in practice? How should the disciples have reacted instead?

Well from scripture we see that faith operates at different levels and Romans 12v3 says we are called to respond 'according to the measure of faith' that has been given to us so I want to examine what that can look like for us in practice.

One of my heroes of faith is George Muller who built orphanages in Bristol and experienced God's extraordinary provision in all sorts of ways through prayer.

He talks about there being two levels of faith. The first he calls *the Grace of faith* which is the level of faith every Christian should attain to. Starting with the saving faith that comes through belief in Jesus and trust in God's love and forgiveness through the cross, the grace of faith is that growing quiet trust that God is with us according to his promises that he will not leave us nor forsake us, whatever situation we are facing.

So if the disciples had responded out of a greater measure of the grace of faith, they might have held on and rode out the storm, because they knew Jesus was with them. After all Jesus had commanded them to take him to the other side of the lake, so this was their calling. I don't think Jesus rebuked the disciples for waking him up in the midst of the storm, but rather for saying 'don't you care?'

So perhaps they should have still woken him up and asked him for help in the circumstances, or for guidance so they could proceed to their destination. Faith doesn't always mean escaping the challenge.

If you look in the book of Acts, there is another story of facing a storm at sea. The Apostle Paul had been arrested but was told by God that he would stand trial before Caesar and testify about Jesus in Rome. There were delays on the journey and Paul warned the captain of the ship that it would be very dangerous to proceed. Nevertheless they sailed on and straight into a hurricane. In this case the storm was not stilled. For many days the crew and passengers went without food and had all but given up hope. But through it all Paul kept his faith, told them to keep up their courage and ended up breaking bread with 276 souls on board. He told them 'Last night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood beside me and said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.' So keep up your courage, , for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me. Nevertheless, we must run aground on some island.'" And so the ship was wrecked in a bay on the island of Malta and it led to the salvation of many islanders. You can visit the museum of the shipwreck near St. Paul's bay today.

If we pursue our God-given destiny, then whatever happens we can have faith that God will bring everything together for good in the end. Our ultimate destiny is to enter God's heavenly presence, forgiven and free, wearing robes of white, with Jesus welcoming us home to the sound of the Lord's blessing: 'well done good and faithful servant.'

So faith doesn't mean thoughtless passivity, but rather thinking and reacting from a baseline of trust, whatever the outcome. At the end of the day christian faith says 'whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.' (Romans 14v8)

As well as what he calls the grace of faith, George Muller also talks about the gift of faith which is a special provision of faith from the Holy Spirit. I have only experienced the gift of faith a couple of times in my ministry, but somehow the gift of faith unleashes the power of the Holy Spirit with uncanny certainty.

If the gift of faith can move mountains, it can certainly calm storms.

If the disciples had responded with the gift of faith, then perhaps they would have commanded the storm to be stilled in the name of the one they carried with them. Jesus gave us authority to heal the sick and cast out demons and the joy of intercession is to declare in faith that Christ has the victory over sin, the world and the devil and that no weapon formed against us will stand.

George Muller didn't claim to have the gift of faith, but he clearly operated at that level on many occasions, as described by Charles Inglis who was an evangelist who often crossed the Atlantic to preach in America. He heard about George Muller's faith from one of the ship's captains. He said this:

'When I first came to America, thirty-one years ago, I crossed the Atlantic with the captain of a steamer who was one of the most devoted men I ever knew, and when we were off the banks of Newfoundland he said to me:

"Mr. Inglis, the last time I crossed here, five weeks ago, one of the most extraordinary things happened which, has completely revolutionized the whole of my Christian life. Up to that time I was one of your ordinary Christians. We had a man of God on board, George Muller, of Bristol. I had been on that bridge for twenty-two hours and never left it. I was startled by someone tapping me on the shoulder. It was George Muller:

"'Captain, he said, 'I have come to tell you that I must be In Quebec on Saturday afternoon.' This was Wednesday.

"'It is impossible,' I said.

"Very well, if your ship can't take me, God will find some other means of locomotion to take me. I have never broken an engagement in fifty-seven years.'

"I would willingly help you. How can I? I am helpless.'

The ship was completely fog-bound and could only proceed at a snail's pace.

"Let us go down to the chart-room and pray.'

"I looked at that man of God, and I thought to myself, what lunatic asylum could that man have come from? I never heard of such a thing.

"Mr. Muller,' I said, 'do you know how dense the fog is?'

"No,' he replied, 'my eye is not on the density of the fog, but on the living God who controls every circumstance of my life.'

"He got down on his knees and prayed one of the most simple prayers. I muttered to myself: 'That would suit a children's class where the children were not more than eight or nine years old.' The burden of his prayer was something like this: 'O Lord, if it is consistent with Thy will, please remove this fog in five minutes. You know the engagement you made for me in Quebec on Saturday. I believe it is your will.'

"When he finished. I was going to pray, but he put his hand on my shoulder and told me not to pray. "First, you do not believe He will; and second. I believe He has. And there is no need whatever for you to pray about it.' I looked at him, and George Muller said

"Captain. I have known my Lord for forty-seven years, and there has never been a single day that I have failed to gain an audience with the King. Get up, captain, and open the door, and you will find the fog is gone.' I got up, and the fog was gone!

"You tell that to some people of a scientific turn of mind, and they will say, 'That is not according to natural laws.' No, it is according to spiritual laws. The God with whom we have to do is omnipotent. Hold on to God's omnipotence. Ask believingly. On Saturday afternoon, I may add, George Muller was there on time."

Instead of ignoring or circumnavigating the storms we face in life Jesus is right in there with us in the midst of it, showing us that real peace comes not from the absence of challenges but the comfort of his presence and the opportunity to pray for breakthrough. This story invites us to trust in God to bring the peace of heaven to bear on the circumstances around us.

According to the measure of faith that God has given us we first take courage to face the storm and trust in the one who is with us, then as we ask for and receive the gift of faith, so we can speak with power and authority to still the waves.

The disciples learned from their experiences because when they faced another challenge later on Luke tells us they cried out to Jesus, "Increase our faith!" (Luke 17:5)

So we echo that today. Let's pray for both the grace and gift of faith as we face lots the different storms that will inevitably come out of nowhere.