

Hespeler, 7 February 2021 © Scott McAndless – Communion
Mark 4:35-41, Psalm 29, 1 Corinthians 9:16-23, Matthew 7:1-12, 24-29

When we held our online auction here at St Andrews Hespeler last fall, I once again put in as an item the opportunity to ask for a sermon on a particular topic. And I don't know if you all realize what a risky move that was. It is one thing to do that in an auction that is held down in our fellowship hall where only people who are present can bid. It is quite another when literally anyone in the world could put in a bid. Who knows how close I came to having to preach a sermon about Bernie Sanders' mittens or the gospel according to Doctor Who?

But, fortunately the winning bid was not put in by some J-Pop fan or a Q Anon conspiracy theorist, but by my good friend and yours, Andy Cann. And a few weeks ago, Andy came to me with his sermon topic. He wanted me to preach about storms. What about storms, I had to ask. How do they form? How can we predict them? No, he said. He wanted to know how we can survive them and how we can maybe even come out stronger from them.

What the Bible says about storms

So I had my work cut out for me. Of course, the Bible has a great deal to say about storms. We have the wonderful psalm that we read this morning where the voice of the Lord is heard in a mighty and terrible storm that rages in from the sea and across the landscape of ancient Israel. I also immediately thought of the story of Jesus in the boat with his disciples and how he slept in the bottom of the boat even while the storm raged around it and his disciples were in fear for their lives. Surely, if Jesus could sleep through something like that, he knew a thing or two about how to survive and maybe even thrive in the face of such troubling events. But that story doesn't quite tell us what the secret of Jesus' calm was. For that, we need to turn to some very explicit teaching that Jesus gave to his disciples in a sermon that nobody had to bid for in an auction.

Jesus' advice on storms

Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount ends with these words, **"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain**



fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!”

And you see that, right there, Jesus is giving away his secret. He’s explaining how it is that he can be so at peace in the midst of the storm that he could even fall asleep in the bottom of the boat. And, since I could hardly do a better job of imparting truth than Jesus, I could probably just say to Andy, well there you go. Job done! But, somehow, I suspect that Andy wouldn’t think that I had given him his money’s worth. So let’s take a bit of a deeper look into what it is that Jesus is really saying here.

Jesus doesn’t say *if*

Let’s first look at one of the key assumptions that Jesus makes. He doesn’t actually use the word storm, of course, but he certainly describes one in terms of rain, wind and floods. But I would just like us to notice one little word that he doesn’t use. He doesn’t use the word *if*. He doesn’t say that the house would stand *if* the rain, wind and floods came. He simply says that they came. It is a simple point, but it is an important one. It is not that storms are an option or a possibility in life; they are a certainty. Everyone will face them sooner or later.

That is the first point that we must come to terms with. People actually waste so much energy trying to avoid the necessary storms of life, trying to deny them or evade them or sometimes even ignore them. That makes it important to recognize that they are a necessary part of life.

To give but one example, we might all very much wish that the storm of protests over Black Lives Matter that disrupted so many lives over this past summer didn’t happen. Of course, we all wish that George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and others like them hadn’t died. But they did and there was a resulting storm not because God wanted it or because anyone else wanted it but because storms happen. And so it is not enough to just wish that such a storm didn’t happen, we have to actively work to find whatever good we can and bring it out of the storm.

It is all about foundations

Okay, so given that storms are inevitable, how do we survive them? Jesus’ number one piece of advice is that we need to have a good foundation. We need to be **“founded on rock.”** When the storms of life come, I think that we often face the temptation to put our trust in all kinds of things – our feelings, our knowledge, our experience. There is nothing wrong with any of these things, of course, but they are not necessarily what is going to get us through the storm. Only a strong foundation can do that. That means putting your focus on the things that really matter – the people you love, the God that you trust and the truths that matter most to you. If you know what are these things that stand at the very foundation of your life, you will be able to weather the storm.

Of course what often happens when the winds blow and the floods rise, is that we become distracted by other things that are not absolutely foundational to life, things like material possessions that are replaceable, ideas of ourselves that ultimately don’t matter because they are not really true and other illusions that we cling to. The storms often come into our lives precisely in order to show us what really does matter and that is why having those strong foundations can make all the difference.

Jesus also goes on to tell us how to build those strong foundations. **“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock,”** he says. The message is clear, if you want to have good foundations for your life, the kind that beat the storm, then you had better pay close attention to what Jesus has said and put it into action in your life.

This is true, of course, of all the words of Jesus throughout the gospels, but the specific reference here is to the words of Jesus that Matthew has just reported to us, the famous Sermon on the Mount that is found in Matthew 5, 6 and 7. So, really, the best advice that I could give you for laying some very solid foundations in your life, Andy, is to invest some real time into studying and putting those three chapters into action in your life. To really live them out, I suspect, you really ought to make that your project of study and meditation for a good period of time.

There is, obviously, no possibility for me to dig out all of the deep truths found in that sermon in the time that now remains to me but let me at least pull out some of the wisdom that I believe can be especially helpful to us in these particularly storm laden days.

Focus on what you can change

For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus offers this teaching, **“Why do you see the speck in your neighbour’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbour, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye’, while the log is in your own eye?”** I think there is a great deal of good advice for traveling through storms in those words. When things get stormy in our lives, I think we often have a tendency to become obsessed with the things that are beyond our control. “Oh, why are people demanding so much of my attention?” we cry. Or, “Why won’t anybody give me a break?” These things can easily become the focus of our frustrations and we waste our energy railing against them when we can do nothing about them. So Jesus’ suggestion that we focus on what there is in ourselves, the log in our own eyes, that we actually can do something about, is really helpful advice.

Don’t waste your effort

In the same way, I think we need to take to heart what Jesus says just after that, **“Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you.”** What does it mean to throw your pearls before swine? Well, it seems to be a way of saying that you are putting forth your very best effort for someone or something that is really not deserving of it. And I suspect that that is something that we all do a lot of when we go through the difficult times of life, the storms. Ask yourself, while you are making your way through some personal or family crisis, how much emotional and physical energy do you waste trying to keep other people or demands that matter nowhere near as much as the foundational things in your life, how much energy do you waste trying to keep them happy. In the

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storm, don't waste your time or your attention on the things that don't matter because they will mess you up just like a pack of ugly swine.

Learn to trust your Father

But by far the most important piece of advice that Jesus has for you as you navigate the storms is this, **“Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.”** What Jesus is trying to teach us here is that, even in the most difficult times of life, we need to be learning to put our trust in God.

And I know that people will have trouble with that famous saying of Jesus. They will say, “I did ask for God's help when I was going through the storm. I asked God to get me out of it and he didn't.” And I can certainly understand why, when people are going through such times, they're going to make such requests.

But that is not really what Jesus was trying to say. Jesus never promised that God would get you out of all the storms of life. He said that the rain and the wind and the floods would come. When he said that you should ask God, he was saying that you should ask for what you need in the midst of the storm. And, even more important, that you should ask with perfect faith that your Father in heaven will give good things to those who ask him!

You see, when we are in the storm, we don't always have the clearest understanding of what we actually need. Often, we will do things like avoid conflict when instead what we need to do is to find constructive ways to work through our conflicts. Often, we will grasp at what looks like the easy solution to our problems when we actually need to work something out the hard way.

If you've been through a storm before, chances are that you have struggled with some of these very desires to take shortcuts or find an easy way through the storm. What Jesus is talking about here is developing a relationship with your Father in heaven where you learn to trust what God gives you and that it is what you need most in that moment. That is not an easy thing to learn of course, but it really is something that can bring you through the storms of life.

Storms are a part of life. You will face them. We all will. But it is actually only when we learn to trust in the God who accompanies us through the storm that we will be able to find the peace and calm that Jesus found in the stern of that boat in the middle of the Sea of Galilee. That was what Jesus was trying to teach us and that was what will bring us through the storms of life.