

Storm Sunday (9Oct16)

Job28:20-27;

1Corinthians1:21-31;

Psalms29;

Luke8:22-25

Given the lack of Mosquito Sunday or Lamprey Sunday, Bacteria, Virus, & Parasites Sunday or Carp-With-a-Face-Only-a-Mother-Could-Love Sunday, given that Sundays of that nature are not named amid this Season of Creation, it seems Storm Sunday bears the weight of less lovely parts of creation and how to address those and see them as part of the whole. That will be our final direction, too, with a crucified God willing to engage the ugly and painful in creation and our lives.

We begin in continuing to recognize the complexity of creation not being straightforwardly constantly charming. Some in this vast family of creatures are even plain unlikeable (though honestly that just reinforces the notion of it *being* a family, since almost all of us know what it's like not always to get along in our families, occasionally finding each other lacking in adorable lovability).

Already in this Season of Creation, we've dealt with aspects of creation that don't appeal to us, that aren't useful as "natural resources" and may even—in the very identity of their existence—prove harmful to humans. We glimpsed that broader delight—moving beyond the anthropocentric, human-focused view of the world—most specifically in God's praise of Leviathan, the fearsome sea monster.

We may meet that idea still more deeply with storms, that there isn't an unambiguous good in them. Just as we must see ourselves simultaneously as sinners and saints, there is the complexity of evil versus righteousness even within the elements of nature.

Water, for example, is most often glorified in our worship services as life-giving, as the cleansing spring to purify and renew us in our

baptism, and as what parches the dry and weary deserts to refresh flowers and sustain our own bodies. Yet particularly in recent weeks, we've also endured a negative side of water, when there's too much and it takes away life, when floods destroy crops and trickles find ways to seep into our basements.

With that sense, it seems we have to gird ourselves for the buffeting of this storm. Rather than retread the same territory of past weeks that declares God's blessing as wider than the measures of our mind, today we can't leave the creatures of the deep off to the side or declare that God is the mother who loves even the ugly faces.

In this confrontation, an obvious approach is awe. Storms demand respect or amazement. That may be with anvilhead cumulonimbus clouds blackening against the top of the troposphere with internal gales that can sling up and down softball-sized hail. I can't quite comprehend that, much less truly big things like jet streams and the Coriolis effect. And then there are the stunning statistics, like lightning bolts being five times hotter than the surface of the sun and carrying a billion volt electrical charge. Or Hurricane Matthew with winds that sustained at more than 175 mph (while category 5) and was bigger than the whole state of Wisconsin, with an intensity from which some will never recover, and yet amid that had an eye of the storm where it was calm and the sun was shining. I can't really grasp the experience of either of those fronts.

Perhaps I don't need to mention blizzards and windchills right now. I will say that a part of me unwisely longs to witness a tornado. But, again, I can't fathom that it could peel asphalt from a road and lift homes off their foundation and bend metal vehicles beyond recognition and toss them miles away. The closest image I can hold of it is Dorothy's house spinning up away

from Kansas, with trees and a chicken coop, a rowboat and a cow drifting past. Even more incomprehensible is the thought that tornados can annihilate one house, and then leap completely over another and leave it unscathed. Particularly since among these destructive so-called "acts of God," that sense of tornadoes is labeled on occasion as the "finger of God," we'll have to return to that.

In the meantime, we may trace at least some of the reason for this correlation. Indeed, when God speaks in the book of Job, it is out of a whirlwind. Both God and storms are seen as rare things larger than we are, enormous and unpredictable, as unapproachable and therefore associated with the terms fear and awe. That's interesting, since we don't much these days or in this place hang on to these concepts of God. We better envisage God as that loving Mother or as buddy Jesus—and what a friend we have in him!—or as a benign encouraging energy. But perhaps a side benefit to this Storm Sunday is not only that we pay attention to this part of creation, but also hold on to the inexplicable mystery of an awesome God.

So we might try to approach this fearsome grandeur (of either God or storms) by seeking the benefits, sort of peering past the humbling to glimpse more agreeable edges, finding that metaphorical silver lining in the literal thunderclouds. So we might notice that nitrogen essential for the growth of plants and for our own wellbeing is made available by the violence of lightning strikes. We may find gratitude for cyclones stirring ocean waters warming colder parts of the ocean and the planet. We may observe the spring floods not only carved the Grand Canyon but also year-by-year sustained life both by clearing away waste and by depositing rich silts, from making the ancient Nile fertile for farming for our predecessors to fostering the richness for abundant life in

Mississippi backwaters in a way that our runoff-controlling dams no longer allow. We're up against the balance of where storms encourage life and where our resistance to the storms also squelches ecological well-being.

Of course, while we talk about the power of storms, we also have to recognize our own power that magnifies the storms, that is making ocean waters more fertile for violence and is enraging wildfires and changing the content of clouds and is creating feedback loops that likely in some way are affecting not only our insurance premiums but our neighboring farmers and food prices and such. We aren't merely victims in this complex and interrelated system.

But that, more than ever, might make us ask about the place of God, about where God is in the midst of the storms. This, of course, is Job's question. In the verses we heard today, Job trusts that there's some wisdom of God's in the storms, a decree and shape for winds and lightning bolts, some kind of divine plan for where waters will flow. In interesting poetic language, Job declares that even Death and Destruction don't understand this. We might take that to mean the storms aren't only the work of punishment or disaster, but something more.

Yet even while these verses proclaim some confidence in or acceptance of God's work and wisdom in the inexplicable, Job won't give up his protest. In this same speech a few paragraphs later, he accuses God of hurling him to and fro, saying "you blow me apart in the tempest" (30:22, NJB). So it seems we must deal with agency, of God causing the storms, of these, indeed being acts of God.

For that, the Gospel reading supposes two alternate possibilities. On the one hand, if the storm is allowed to wreak its havoc, if the waves swamp us and danger threatens to overpower us, if we are in some figurative or actual way

"sunk," then we have to wonder if God is asleep at the wheel, if Jesus is snoozing in the back of the boat and not at all mindful of our trauma or terrors. The version of this story in Mark's Gospel has the disciples begging the incisive question, "Don't you care that we're perishing?!"

With the other perspective, it may seem that in that instance (at least) God cared. Jesus woke up and the one with power to command the winds and the water rebuked the storm, and the raging waves ceased.

Now, maybe those disciples had the benefit of being able to prod Jesus in their boat. Yet if we have the privilege of carrying everything to him and the promise that he hears, still we must ask about these storms, these alleged acts of God. I may be wrong, but I don't believe that my petitions or insistent begging or frantic prayers would make the tornado skip over my house to hit somebody else's instead. On the other hand, while I do believe God established patterns for weather and natural systems, I don't believe God just puffed the atmosphere into existence and lets it run its course, but still interacts with us and responds to us and strives for us.

So what? What could that mean?

Perhaps again we turn to Paul's stunning words from the start of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians for another perspective, this message of the cross as God's wisdom. In this alternative vision, storms aren't the "acts of God" wantonly spreading destruction, much less inflicted as punishment (as we're sometimes told, for categories of sin or whatever). And God's presence is not either ignorant of our concerns nor simply elevating us out of risk and worry. Rather, in the cross, we have the peculiar evidence of God with us in suffering and even through loss, a God who won't miraculously still every storm at our insistence, but even more

miraculously won't abandon ship or leave you alone in your fears. God in Christ is not unscathed by the storm. This incomprehensible and awesome God, mightier than a hurricane and more persistent than the spread of floodwaters assures, "Fear not, I am with you, oh, be not dismayed, for I am your God and will still give you aid." (*How Firm a Foundation*, ELW 696)