

Riding Out the Storm
Psalm 107:1-3 and 23-32 and Mark 4:35-41
First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota
June 24, 2018
Rev. Glen Bell

It was the worst moment of my childhood.

In the summer I turned eight, my parents took the plunge. As parents of two young boys, they picked up and left their home in Charlotte, and moved to Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina. They went from big city to backwater, from metropolis to small town America, so they could live out the dream of owning their own business, a motel and restaurant.

I remember life there with great fondness. On summer days, I would ride along with my dad to the banks, to make the deposits. With my brother, I would sweep the parking lot and weed the azaleas and take extra towels to guests in the motel. I learned to work the cash register and to rent rooms. We were always slammed for Sunday lunch – the busiest meal of the week in the restaurant – so we learned to leave during the final hymn at worship to get back just before all the customers.

Before my parents bought the business, both restaurant and motel had been losing money. My parents risked everything they had to make a go of it. They worked hard, very hard. They paid themselves very little and plowed all the proceeds back into the business.

Two years passed. Both motel and restaurant began to make money. My parents thought they had turned the corner. My parents envisioned a future in which they could provide well for my brother and me.

With a sense of joy and satisfaction, my dad took my older brother back to Charlotte to close on the sale of our small home there. You see, my mom and dad had held onto it in case the business went south.

That weekend, that very Saturday night, my mother and I woke to pounding on our apartment door. We stepped out to see the motel fully engulfed in flames, the fire burning brightly only fifteen feet in front of us. We barely escaped.

People worked hard to make sure everyone got out alive, thank God. But helplessly, wordlessly, my mother and I watched as a significant part of the motel burned to the ground.

I still remember my mother at three and four a.m., making coffee in the restaurant for all the fire fighters, hurrying to support and encourage them and to check on me.

We spent that night – that early morning, really - at my aunt and uncle's home. There, my mother made the most difficult call of her life. She phoned my father to tell him what had happened. The fire was so large, so destructive it was the front-page headline in the local paper.

That fire was a storm, my friends. It was trouble. Just like the psalmist foretold, our courage melted away in the midst of the calamity. My mother and I were at our wits' end. We reeled and staggered, numbed by the fierceness of the fire. We were lost in our distress.

It was the worst moment of my childhood. But it was not the most important part of the story.

The most important moment happened the next day. My mother and I could still smell the smoke on us, no matter how many times we washed our hands and face. She was both bone tired and keyed up, I think - hypervigilant, on edge, wondering what might happen next.

That day we went to downtown Roanoke Rapids, where the manager of the main department store met us. Now, that store never opened on a Sunday. This was small-town North Carolina decades ago.

But he walked with us into that huge darkened store. He turned on all the overhead fluorescent lights. And he waited – he waited patiently - while my mother and I picked out some new clothes.

We had nothing, you see. All that we owned was burned, gone, or ruined by the smoke and the water.

I don't remember his name. I can't even recall his face. But this is lodged in my heart: He was a member of our church. And he helped us. He helped us with exactly what we needed, at one of the most difficult and most vulnerable moments of my life.

For that man, for that nameless man, I give God thanks and praise.

Both our scripture lessons this morning center on storms. They are the worst of moments, overwhelming moments, moments when the darkness has crashed over us and inside us.

The disciples are terrified by the wind and the waves. The swells keep getting larger and larger and the wind stronger and stronger, and Jesus – well, Jesus is asleep! He's doing nothing to help them.

Michael Lindvall, former pastor at Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City, puts it this way. "Fear is confronted in this story, but not by a sudden burst of courage or resolve on the part of the disciples." Oh, no! "They never pull themselves together. They do not . . . discover inner resources they did not know they had. Rather, it is Jesus [after he awakens] who calms both them and the storm with the power of his presence.

"Jesus never says, 'There is nothing to be afraid of.' Instead he says, 'Do not be afraid.'"

This psalm fits our life together. There is the pointing to the storm, the recollection of the great trouble and distress. But none of this becomes the most important moment in the story.

The most important moment is both the then and the now. The then: "They were glad because they had quiet . . . and the waves of the sea were hushed . . . and God brought them to their desired haven." And the now: "Let us thank the Lord for God's steadfast love, for all God's wonderful works! Let us extol God in the congregation and praise God in the assembly!"

Praise! Praise and thanksgiving! This is what comes out of the storm. This is revealed as our heart of hearts. This is the most important moment to remember and repeat.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann puts it pointedly – and with a beauty that breaks our hearts: "Praise," he writes "is an act of relinquishment."

Think about that. Facing the storm before us, turning our small boat into the crashing waves, demands we let go of ourselves. The devastation of the storm, the piercing flames of the fire – they destroy all we thought most important, all we thought defined our lives.

And when the storm is over, when it is finished with us, then we are able to recognize the Holy One, the One who delivers us and brings us through. It is just as Presbyterian pastor Neta Pringle testifies, "We bear witness to what God has done. We proclaim God's faithfulness to all . . . children. Every grace bestowed, every grace declared, confirms God's promises.

"Others can hear our story and find home in the midst of their darkness. Others can hear our praise and find voice to speak their words of gratitude. Each voice strengthens the other in both the hard times and the good."

I don't remember the name of the department store manager. I don't know what he had planned for that Sunday. I don't know what he gave up, what it cost him to help us. But I know this: He was a member of our church. He was our brother in Christ. He helped us.

Today you and I have the opportunity to do and be the same for others.

Even through the worst moment of my childhood, I was blessed by one foundational experience, one unalterable grace: My mother was always by my side. Hustling me out the door in the face of the fire, leading me to safety, checking on me over and over again through that terrible night, her presence made all the difference.

But remember all the boys and girls and babies – hundreds of them -who are now in the midst of trouble. They have crossed our borders, and now they have been scattered to the east and west and north and south, right in middle of the storm. They are at their wits' end. They are crying out. They have been separated from their mother and their father.

This is not a partisan issue. This is not a debate about zero tolerance or limited tolerance, about which laws we should apply to immigration. No, this strikes at our heart.

Will we work to offer these children quiet and peace? Will we bring them to a haven, at the side of their mother and father? Or will we simply stand back and watch it happen?

In *The Vanishing Neighbor*, Marc Dunkelman holds up a mirror in front of us. Membership and long-term commitments and concern are eroding in American life. “Instead of joining the Kiwanis Club’s” – or the Presbyterian church’s – “evolving efforts to improve our local communities, we are more likely now to sign up for a group . . . to champion the paving of more bike lanes or to lobby against cuts to the state education trust fund. Because those efforts are often short-lived, the institutions that [create] deep connections have given way to more ephemeral relationships. . . . The same people who might have once been pillars of a town’s nonprofit community have been pulled toward different sorts of organizations, many of which simply don’t establish the same sorts of . . . roots.”¹

That is why we Christians thank God with one another in worship, here among sisters and brothers who work together even amid our differences. That is why we Christians praise God in the assembly.

This deep commitment, what the Bible calls “being members one of another,”² is exactly what helps us through the storms. I know I can call you, and you deacons will show up. I know I can send an email, and you Stephen Ministers will step forward. I know even without any leadership from me or any of our church staff, our Caritas volunteers will be serving on the streets of Sarasota, helping those in need, especially parents with young children.

What keeps me alive and alert and active as a pastor, what keeps me going in ministry, is the memory of that nameless, faceless man who helped my mother, on one of the worst days of my life, because he was a member of our church, because he was a part of our spiritual family. He wasn’t our special friend. He was a church member.

What keeps me awake and eager and ready as a pastor, what keeps me going in ministry, is the maturity of so many of you who stand ready to serve, not just the people you like, not just the people you agree with, not just those who vote for the same candidates as you, but everyone.

I see you. Sisters and brothers, I see you. I see you forgiving and loving one another, I see you sharing and opening your hearts, even and especially when it is not easy, even through the storms.

I see you. And I give thanks.

¹ Marc J. Dunkelman, *The Vanishing Neighbor* (2014, Norton), pages 44-45

² Romans 12:5