

## **FAITH AND/OR DOUBT**

And so once again we hear a story of the miraculous power of Jesus. He and his disciples are in a boat this time, in the midst of a powerful storm which threatened to overturn their boat and drown them. And amidst it all, Jesus is seen at one end of the boat sleeping, until the disciples wake him up and ask ‘don’t you care about us?’ And the story has a nice fairy tale feel to it when Jesus gets up and tells the storm to stop, and the waters obey his command, and the storm disappears. And we can perhaps understand the disciples’ feelings of amazement and wonder – it was still early in their relationship with Jesus and they were still trying to figure out who he really was. But perhaps the imagery of Jesus sleeping suggests that he wasn’t worried at all about the disciples meeting the challenge of the storm. And perhaps his actions suggest that his presence is a powerful force in how we meet our own lives’ storms.

Fast forward to Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. By this time, Jesus had gone from being a labourer to a king, then crucified, then resurrected, and finally ascended back into heaven. This chain of events convinced Paul that Jesus was in fact the divine son of God, and he spent the rest of his life proclaiming it to all who would listen. Through the dark times of imprisonment and suffering, Paul’s faith only became stronger – the more he suffered, the more he believed. And through it all, his faith became more and more rooted, more and more anchored. Unlike the disciples in the Mark story, Paul had no doubts. And he may have believed that the anger and rage the rulers felt against Christianity suggested that the Christians were really on to something – a force bigger and more powerful than anyone could comprehend. And ironically, the stormier the path, the more strength Paul developed to walk it.

Well, so much for the early Christians’ storms – what about ours? What storms do we face in our lives? Are there fears at times that threaten to overwhelm us? We believe ourselves to have faith, but when a significant challenge or crisis comes, do we fear we will be left alone? Does the root of our faith provide us with stability when the emotional pain of our crisis becomes almost too much to bear?

In past sermons I've shared some of my own examples with you, and you've all faced storms of varying intensity along your own paths. But we're still here. Somewhere inside us we've developed a strength and resilience borne out the fact that we've come through them; like St. Paul, we've grown stronger along the way and have developed increased confidence in our ability to meet the next one. It doesn't mean we welcome them or go looking for them, like those scientific geographers who spend their career lives chasing tornadoes. Instead, I like the words to the Helen Reddy Song *I Am Woman* – they apply to all of us - 'yes, I am wise, but it's wisdom borne of pain – yes, I've paid the price, but look how much I've gained; if I had to, I could do anything.' (woman / human)

As believing Christians, we've learned to 'weather the storms', which wasn't the case for the pilots of an Air France jet that crashed into the Atlantic Ocean during a storm some years ago. A report into the event found that the speed indicators on the outside of the plane had frozen, leading to the automatic flying systems in the plane to shut off in rapid succession. In addition to not knowing the true speed of the plane, the pilots were overwhelmed with the pace at which the systems were shutting down, and as they frantically searched the operations manual for a remedy for one problem, another problem would spring up. And through all the confusion and chaos, while they thought the plane was climbing to a safer altitude, it was actually falling out of the sky. One of the analysts of the accident commented that a big part of the problem had been that on this particular model of aircraft, because it was so well-equipped with state-of-the-art systems that would let the plane fly automatically, pilots were given little training on how to actually fly the plane manually. While most of their training had been on taking off and landing, it was assumed that the modern technology incorporated into the design of the plane would mean that the pilots would seldom need to take over the flying controls. And when I heard this concept, one of my first thoughts was that *the Titanic wasn't supposed to sink either*. Sometimes our technological achievements can make us arrogant and lead us to believe we're totally invincible, and we lose sight of our own imperfect humanity. We're seeing an increased interest in the concept of *Artificial Intelligence*, whereby computers analyze and interpret reams

of data and make recommendations and decisions about the best course of action in a given situation. And while there are indeed beneficial applications of this technology, we may want to use caution in how much personal autonomy we give away to technology. True *human* resilience is rooted in the power of the *human* spirit, and we must not negate it or lose sight of it. Jesus himself didn't have the benefit of googling answers to the questions he faced. Yet 2000 years after his presence here, we're still relying on his message and its relevance for humanity.

And so, we can either go the way of the disciples on the boat and doubt and try to wake Jesus up, or we can be like Paul and have a determined faith that even after Jesus's death, he is still very much alive and available to us. In reality, we're probably going to continue to experience both options along our paths. I personally don't pretend or believe for one moment that any of this is necessarily easy. Some of our pains might never end in this lifetime, and for sure, all of our questions won't be answered. It's likely that even if we received the answers to all our questions right at this moment, we wouldn't be able to digest and comprehend them all. But as we feel them and live through our storms as best we can, there will always be periods of sunlight in between, and we need to bask in those times and experience the true joy of life. And whether or not Jesus actually calmed the waters in the story in Mark's gospel isn't the point of that story. The point is that his presence in the energy forces of our own lives affords us a measure of peace and calm, when we open ourselves enough to receive it. And I'm looking forward to next week's service when I can advance *this* concept to an even greater level.

God doesn't demand that we fly alone on autopilot on our journeys. Indeed, the ever-present guiding force of the Creator is here for each of us. It was with us yesterday. It's here now. And it will be here tomorrow. AMEN.

**Brian Stocks. Westminster United Church. June 24, 2018.**