

St. John's Episcopal Church | 212 S. Green Street | Crawfordsville IN  
IV Pentecost - June 20, 2021 - Year B  
Job 38:1-11 Mark 4:35-41  
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“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

I can still remember singing those words as a member of the chapel choir back in college, when we gave the first performance of a new oratorio on Job by Richard Winslow, who chaired the music department—some twenty-four tenors and basses ringed around the upper gallery of the chapel playing God, as we looked down on the solitary figure of Job in the chancel below; it was a heady experience.

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding,” we thundered at the hapless fellow. “Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?”

I can still hear the echo.

Well, where was anybody when God laid the foundation of the earth—whatever that's supposed to mean?

Job was not there; certainly neither you, nor I, nor anyone of our acquaintance was there; no one was there.

The answer is simple.

But when God's inquiry moves on to other areas, when God's questions probe more deeply, then there's no simple answer.

“Have you entered into the springs of the sea or walked in the recesses of the deep? Have the gates of death been revealed to you or have you seen the gates of deep darkness? Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth?”

No human being can claim to have been in on the ground floor of creation, but quite a few human beings can claim to have plumbed the depths of the cosmos. After all, not only have many of us explored the uttermost reaches of the sea; some of us have walked in outer space.

If none of us can say that we saw the foundation of the earth being laid, then most of us—thanks to the shimmering images sent back to us from way above our atmosphere—most of us can say that we have some idea of where that foundation is; we have “comprehended the expanse of the earth”.

And we have the testimony of many who claim to have stood at the very gates of death, yet have returned to tell the tale.

Job himself, having endured the loss of everything—his family, his health, his material possessions—can surely answer “Yes” to at least some of the questions that confront him from out of the whirlwind: The gates of death have indeed been revealed to him, and he has definitely seen the gates of deep darkness.

But if, indeed, we have come a long way since the days of Job—the limits of human knowledge and technological skill have been vastly expanded, if not exploded—there are still limits beyond which we have not gone and limits beyond which we will probably never go—in this life, any rate.

Facing the fact that we have our limits and our limitations can help us to make some kind of sense out of today's Gospel lesson.

Otherwise, it will be difficult to see more in this passage than the account of the miraculous stilling of a storm at sea.

And I'm afraid we don't relate too easily to the notion of miracles in this day and age.

Miracles—at least the kind of miracles attested to in passages of scripture like this—miracles are not part of our everyday experience.

Oh, there are times when we are surprised by the turn of events, surprised by the final outcome of a chain of circumstances, times when we are caught enough off guard that we are inclined to use the word “miracle” to describe what has happened.

But, even when we do use the word, we are likely to use it tentatively and rather self-consciously.

One of the reasons that we are hesitant to use the word “miracle” these days is that many of the occurrences that scripture calls “miracles” we would consider to

be the result of natural causes; indeed, many of the works of healing attributed by scripture to “miracles” have been duplicated by advancements and refinements in modern medical science.

Much of what is possible now was, in terms of the necessary technology, impossible then.

No wonder what we call “miracles” were once so necessary to get the job done!

Look at the stilling of the sea: Who can prove one way or the other what actually happened?

The writer of the Gospel according to Mark reports that Jesus “rebuked” the wind and the sea, and the storm died down.

Would the storm have died down anyway?

Who can say?

On the one hand, we have clearly little to gain by trying to “explain away” occurrences like the stilling of the storm, as they are reported in the Gospels.

On the other hand, I very much believe that we can learn a lot about our limitations and about our relationship with God from taking an honest look at such noteworthy events in the life of Jesus and his disciples.

I think that it’s fair to say that we don’t like to think very much about our limitations—the things we can’t do, the things we don’t know—and we certainly don’t like to be reminded of them.

The disciples out in the boat certainly came face-to-face with their limitations in a hurry when the storm broke.

Gone were any illusions that they might have had about being able to handle things without anyone's help; gone were any illusions that they might have had about being able to make it on their own.

All of a sudden the disciples realized how dependent they were upon God for their very existence.

Even then, they seemed to draw back from what they took to be a mixed blessing: "Who then is this," they said of Jesus, "that even the wind and sea obey him?"

What did they expect to happen when they woke him?

Misery loves company.

It's quite possible that they woke Jesus because they couldn't stand to see him sleeping peacefully while they were all quaking with fear.

They surely did not expect to be rebuked along with the wind and the sea.

Who wants to be accused of lacking faith even when it's true?

Yet, who can say for sure that Jesus' response to his disciples' expression of fear was a rebuke and not an acknowledgment, an acknowledgment of the limitations of their faith, an acknowledgment that faith in God is finally not our own doing, but a gift from God?

We live in a world in which the preoccupation with utterly controlling our environment has led us away from an attitude of acceptance and peace.

Our stance over against our environment is often an adversarial relationship.

Whatever we can't conquer we fear.

It's tempting to view life this way, too, as something you and I need to manipulate, bring into line, control, conquer, instead of as something we need to learn from, flow with, rest in, feel God's presence in.

At our worst moments we are likely to view our limitations not as a blessing, but as a curse.

Never mind the distinct possibility that dealing with the problems we have to face is actually a large part of what living responsibly is all about.

To bring our God-given gifts and skills to bear on the problems of life, as individuals, as Christians in community, to the best of our ability, and let God handle the rest—that's all we're really called to do.

As I said recently to a friend who, like me, is a worrier: We need to let God do the worrying because God has got to be a lot better at it than we are.

The disciples learned this lesson big time, when they recognized their limitations and realized that there was nothing further that they themselves could do to ease the fury of the storm.

All they could do was remember who it was that was with them and wait for deliverance.

You and I could scarcely hope to improve on the formula: Recognize our limitations, remember that it is God who is with us, and wait for deliverance.

With that kind of assurance we can ride out any storm.