

"God's Good Ways" Matthew 8:23-27 Epiphany 4 2022

Grace and peace in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Looking over our Old Testament and Gospel lessons for today, we can certainly see how God took some very bad and terrifying situations and miraculously turned them into good. The storm that threatened to send that boatload of mariners to the bottom of the sea because of Jonah's selfish sin was instantly calmed when Jonah was cast overboard and into the sea. Those men didn't die because of Jonah's sin. That's good. Let us not forget that Jonah, too, experienced a great reversal in the fact that God didn't punish him and send him to a watery grave because of his sin. Instead, God ordains a great fish to swallow up Jonah to preserve his life and return him to repentant, saving faith. This is very good. The apostles in our Gospel lesson? They're terrified because of the ferocity of the storm they're caught in. They wake up Jesus in their terror and fright, who was napping peacefully in the aft-end of the boat, and He immediately stands up and rebukes the wind and the waves, bringing about an instantaneous flat-calm and serenity that surpasses all understanding. "Who is this man that even the wind and waves obey Him?" Who is this man who so powerfully and effortlessly and immediately turned something so bad and terrifying into something so peaceful and good?

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But you see, that very question does reveal the sinful unbelief and doubt still prevalent in the lives of the apostles (and in our own lives too, if we're so bold to confess). God does work in mysterious ways. We can talk all day long about God taking bad situations and turning them into good. In fact, we love to talk about those miracles and great reversals, and we love even more when we're on the receiving end of such miracles and great reversals. We absolutely love and praise and glorify God when He saves our sorry rear-ends from whatever trouble or grief or sorrow we find ourselves in. We love when God comes through and works good out of our bad.

Well...here's a thought we often don't like to think about: Why did God permit this "bad" to enter our lives to begin with? Why was the trial and sorrow permitted in the first place? Why was this cross given to us to bear? Sadly, this is where a LOT of bad answers and hypotheses come bubbling to the top! Perhaps God is angry with us. Perhaps He's punishing us for some bad behavior on our part. That's what the mariners thought with Jonah, right? It's hard to argue with their logic too, because as soon as Jonah is tossed into the sea to die—to "placate" this angry God (which Jonah himself professes)—the sea goes flat and all is well again. Sadly, many a good Christian sees this as a blueprint for what they need to do when life takes a bad turn south. "God, here's what I'm gonna do for you.... I'll scratch your back and

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grease your palm, and in return you can make this all this bad stuff go away.”

Why does God permit sorrows and terrors and griefs in our lives? Why do we, who love God and hold fast to Him in faith, still have crosses to bear? That doesn't seem fair, does it? Folks: Did you ever stop to think that maybe these terrible and terrifying things have been permitted to enter into your life because this is the only way God could get your attention? Maybe you've been too busy worshipping yourself to hear God's Truth. Maybe you're not as "squeaky clean" and "firm in the faith" as you think you are! I know that's often the case with me. I know I'm not the only one to ever come to the sad realization—to come to the sad epiphany—that it sometimes takes a tragedy to wake me up and get my priorities straightened out and in line. This happens a lot after funerals or after terminal illness is diagnosed. Fear is a great motivator, but change brought about by fear never lasts. Still...death and mortality do have a way of lining things out and shining a bright light on some pretty dark and stupid realities, putting them in proper perspective, at least temporarily. No one has EVER said from their deathbed, "Man, I wish I spent more time at the office and less time with my family. I wish I spent more time making money and less time with my loved ones."

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Here's another thought: Maybe these heart-rending crosses you're experiencing are put upon you, not necessarily to get your attention and wake you up and turn you around, but to wake up and turn around those in your life who are asleep in the faith and headed towards destruction. Maybe God is using you and the exercise of your faith to bring a stubborn, blind, foolish loved one of yours to saving faith. I don't know. I don't pretend to have an answer as to why God allows suffering, or why He makes certain situations into good while others are left to go down in flames. I don't know.

What I do know, however, is that God is ALWAYS working all things for the good of those who love Him, just as He has said—even terrible and terrifying things. COVID. Civil unrest. Untrustworthy governments. Wars. As I said, sometimes that's the only way He can get our attention. The mariners' in Jonah's account were brought to saving faith BECAUSE of those terrible, terrifying storms. God got their attention! In fact, they were calling Him "Yahweh—LORD" before they tossed Jonah overboard; before the seas were made calm. It's sad that it took such a terrifying threat of tragedy to wake them up and bring them to faith, but they were brought to faith. Praise God! It's sad that it took getting tossed overboard and swallowed up by a great fish before Jonah realized that God loved him and ALL people, and truly desired the death of no one...even the wicked and foul Ninevites that

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Jonah so despised. God got through, and worked great and wonderful things out of this. Jonah was saved, and Nineveh repented and came to faith too. Praise God, who works in mysterious, awesome, wonderful ways for our good and our salvation!

And what about the apostles? Those terrifying winds and waves that threatened to send them to a watery grave; that threatened them and terrified them and caused them to cry out in fear to Christ Jesus to do something, were the very things necessary to bring to light the sad fact that the disciples weren't nearly as awesome as they thought. They really were of little faith. If you had asked them before that ship left out on that fateful voyage, all twelve of the apostles would've boasted about their faith and trust in Jesus as Lord. And yet...the wind and waves peeled back the veneer and revealed the sad and tragic truth. They believed, but they also had a lot of unbelief! And God loved them enough to tell them and show them the Truth.

I think of that image of Jesus sleeping peacefully in the back of the boat while all hell is breaking loose all around Him. That is a powerful lesson; a lesson we fail at miserably, day in and day out. Jesus rests peacefully in His Father's care, even as the wind and waves crash all around Him; even as His shipmates are frantically trying to save themselves. Jesus knows His Father has it all handled. The apostles?

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St. Mark tells us in his account that the apostles actually accuse Jesus of apathetic indifference. "Don't you care that we're perishing?!" How often our hearts make the same accusation against our God and Lord. "Don't you care?! Don't you see?! Why don't you do something?!"

And there's the epiphany that God is seeking, not just for those foolish disciples, but for us too, even today, even right now. "O ye of little faith? Why are you so afraid?" That's a good question. Why are you so afraid? Why do you have so much fear and anxiety? Do you not believe that God is in complete control? You say you believe it. You boldly profess it, so...what's the problem?

Folks: Let that sink in for a moment. Yes, life probably isn't shaking out for you the way you planned or imagined. Yes, COVID is hard. Unemployment is hard. Old age is hard. Unexpected changes in our routines are hard. These things come and go, but there's ALWAYS something that will direct your attention and your trust away from your God and Lord.

My hope and prayer, though, is that it doesn't require a tragedy to get your faith and your priorities lined out and back on-track. I hope and pray that the light and life of Christ's cross ever and always is at the forefront of all you say, think, and do. Here is Christ! Here is your peace in the midst of this storm-tossed sea we call life. Here is the Lord

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of Life, holding out to you His unconditional gifts of love and peace and grace and mercy. He still speaks. His voice still penetrates the darkness and the fear and chaos and bespeaks peace. It is finished! You are forgiven. You belong to Him. You bear His name upon your head and your heart, marking you as one who has been redeemed in His holy, blood-bought, sacrificial ransom. You are a baptized child of God. The absolute "worst" thing that anyone can do to you is cause you to wake up in heaven. Hmm...that's not such a bad thing, is it? Kind of puts everything else in perspective, doesn't it? It should. I pray that this Christ-centered epiphany is your epiphany, in good times and in bad, for better and worse, in sickness and in health, richer and poorer...ever and always. Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say, rejoice! Amen.