

Title: The Growing Storm

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, our ancestors called on you in stormy times and your son stilled storms; be with us in these stormy times that we will follow you in love and fairness, taught to us by your son, Christ Jesus, in whom we pray. Amen.

It seems to me that immigration is in the news a lot lately. People are seen carrying signs. Sometimes, people are shouting at each other as if that was a successful mind changing strategy. The Attorney General of the United States is possibly going to be booted out of, not just his church, but out of his denomination, the United Methodist Church. There seems to be some conflict.

The problem is not unique to the United States. The 21st century might be known as the century of mass migrations where immigration laws are ignored. The main problem is a breakdown of common human decency to other human beings. Extreme violence is forcing people to try to find a safe harbor somewhere else.

Speaking of extreme, this may sound extreme, but there is a cascading breakdown of civilization. As parts of the world slip into chaos, people seeking refuge are upending more peaceful countries. It is a growing storm. In some cases, some cases, children are ripped apart from their parents. The family, the basic part of human society, is sometimes destroyed.

Modern nations have, basically, two options in handling this mash up of cultures. The two extremes are found in the 20th century. In Nazi Germany, people who are different were exterminated. In the Soviet Union, different cultures were incorporated as long as they conformed to the state. These two extremes were easy because they were both totalitarian states.

Democracies are messy. In this country, it is messier because there is fear due to the decline of white privilege and especially white male privilege. The illegal crossings are seen as hastening this outcome and some believe they must be stopped at any cost. The political storm was so fierce that the president who never backs down, backed down.

In ancient times, most mingling of cultures happened either through slaves as spoils of war or through hiring mercenaries. In the last issue of Biblical Archeology Review is an article about an Israelite settlement being excavated on the Nile in Egypt. These Israelites were mercenaries. They shared allegiances of their storm god, YHWH (however that is pronounced) and the storm gods of other mercenaries in the area.

In Indo-European cultures, the thunder god is the chief god, with the exception of Thor, son of Odin. The one we often see in the Old Testament is Ba'al, the god of thunder and chief god of the Canaanite pantheon. Beelzebul has the same function for the Philistines. Hadad also shared the same characteristics for the northern Levant.

Careful reading of the Old Testament also reveals that the Israelites worshipped many gods. In fact, Israel means the followers of the Canaanite god, El. In fact, the God of the Israelites is sometimes referred to as El. The Psalms, particularly, reference the God of Israel being more powerful than the other gods. In the Ten Commandments, God wants the other gods banished, "you shall have no other gods before me." (Exodus 20:3 NRSV) "Before" could also be translated as besides.

Sometime either before or during the reign of King David, an Arab god named YHWH (however that is pronounced), began to be worshipped in both the southern kingdom of Judah and the northern kingdom of Israel. It is my observation, and I am speaking only for myself, that YHWH (however that is pronounced) became the principle god of Judah, but Ba'al continued to be the principle god of Israel. There were likely separate cults who worshipped just one of these thunder gods.

It seems that YHWH (however that is pronounced) is also a thunder god. We see this in many psalms, 18, 29, 40, 68, 77, 97, 104, 135, 144, 147, and 148. We see this in the Sinai story. We see it in 2 Samuel and in Job. "Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind: 'Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?'" (Job 38:1-2) Job 38 is one of my favorite parts of the Bible. It describes the vast difference between human beings and God.

Job is a very old story adapted for a monotheistic religion. What was added to the story was an epic poem, one of the greatest poems from antiquity. The poem is a series of dialogues between Job and what I call his so-called friends. Job falls on very hard times with a horrible disease. This was a result of a sort of bet between God and Satan. Satan was betting that Job would stop being faithful if Job fell on hard times and suffered.

The friends submit the popular Jewish theology that if one hits hard times, it is because God is punishing the person for sinning. Job defends himself by proclaiming his innocence. The friends insist that Job needs to think harder about the wrong Job has done.

Finally, Job appeals to God for justice. Job does not deserve what happened to him. Chapter 38 is God's reply to Job. This is a favorite of mine because God puts Job in his place. Job has no capacity to fully understand God and neither do we. In essence God is telling Job, "Who do you think you are, you pipsqueak?" Of course, the story emphasizes one God who is responsible for everything.

Monotheism was only established after the return from the Babylonian exile with the founding of the Jewish religion. It was during the exile that the religious leaders blamed their plight on the people who worshipped other gods.

All of this is setting the stage for the story of Jesus stilling a storm. (Mark 4:35-41) Jesus has spent a heavy day telling the people parables. The sun was near its setting and it was time to call it a day. So, Jesus and the disciples load themselves into boats and proceed to cross the Sea of Galilee. There is a sense that the disciples had to kidnap Jesus to get him on a boat.

A great windstorm rose and the waves battered the boat. I think most of us have seen pictures or video of strong winds causing high waves on Lake Tahoe. Though the Sea of Galilee is much shallower, winds can also stir up great waves there as well. The waves were high enough that water spilled into the rocking boats. They were likely furiously baling water out to keep afloat. Panic ensued.

Meanwhile, an exhausted Jesus was in the stern sleeping through the commotion. I mean, Jesus must have been really tired. A storm that violent must have lifted Jesus off the cushion he was sleeping on.

The disciples wake Jesus. That *must* have been a miracle. If the storm couldn't wake Jesus, I don't know how the disciples would have accomplished the task. But they did. Once Jesus is awake, the disciples ask a very peculiar question, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" (Mark 4:38b)

The disciples are seeing their deaths before their eyes and they blame Jesus for caring nothing for their fate. Jesus was asleep! Jesus was not conscious of all the ruckus around him. How could he care or not care? They may have believed that Jesus was faking sleep. How could anyone sleep through that storm?

Jesus dusts the sleep from his brain and assesses the situation. Jesus orders the wind and the sea to be still and be at peace. They obey.

Next Jesus turns his attention to the disciples. Jesus is disappointed. They are in Jesus' presence and they experience fear. They saw Jesus perform many miracles and yet they thought they would die even with Jesus on the boat. Jesus asks them, "Have you still no faith?" (Mark 4:40b) Apparently not. I guess Jesus felt he could have slept longer if they had not panicked.

The disciples were amazed. "Who is this that orders the wind and the sea?" Who is this that has power over nature? The storm gods of the gentiles surrounding the Jews of Jesus' time were still there. Except now they have two more brought in first, by the Greeks, and second, by the Romans – Zeus and Jupiter. Mark directs the disciple's question to the reader of the gospel with the obvious answer that the one who orders the wind and sea is God.

The immigration storm can be scary. A response of panic is probably not appropriate. Do we need to wake Jesus and call for calm and peace? Jesus is likely not sleeping. Jesus gave us the tools we need to respond to any human need.

Jesus is personal and empathetic. Jesus can be a storm god but that is not Jesus' purpose. Jesus' purpose is to reconcile people and bring them to God

out of love and not fear. That is the point of Jesus' parables and his teachings.

Jesus gave us two commandments: love God and love our neighbor. Our neighbors are at the door. They are asking us to save their lives. The Harvard Business Review noted in April that economies that accept migrants grow. The people who are now in cages can make our country better if we let them out.

Text: **Mark 4:35–41** (NRSV)

³⁵ On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." ³⁶ And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. ³⁷ A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. ³⁸ But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" ³⁹ He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. ⁴⁰ He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" ⁴¹ And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

¹ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*](#). (1989). (Mk 4:35–41). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.#