

INTO THE STORM...

It was a joy to be with so many of you, last year, at the Christmas dinner. It is my great honor to join you for this annual Prayer Breakfast, in this the United Nations' 75th anniversary year. I stand with the world in giving thanks for, celebrating and saluting your enduring, selfless service.

How do you recall the early days of your diplomatic service? Diplomacy on the world stage could never be described as straightforward, or without challenge - but looking back – was it just a *little bit* easier?

You have audaciously pledged to sustainable development goals that constitute the blueprint for a better and more sustainable future for all. You have courageously covenanted to face head on the greatest global challenges, including poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace and justice. You have committed to pursue a global partnership, in such a way, that no one gets left behind. But there can be no real progress without change and no change without pain. “Diplomacy...it’s a living martyrdom!”

And along the way, if the challenges to your work were not already significant, it has gotten *not* a little stormy. In the midst of a global pandemic we are witnessing increased global instability, fear and unrest.

Do you feel like you are rowing against swirling global currents? Attempting to find your way with the wind and rain unceasing and hard pressed against you? And what is perhaps, at first sight unsettling, is that God knew about this storm when he asked you to get into this diplomatic boat and make this trip with Him.

I have been in this role for about eighteen months. I am still working out what I need to be doing on a fair day! Let me be candid, when I was signed up, I did not see “global pandemic” in the small print!

We are not the first ambassadors for God’s work, who have struggled with this tension. That is the tension of ***God setting us up to sail into the oncoming storm.***

HOW DID THE DISCIPLES FIND THEMSELVES IN THIS STORM?

Mark 4:1 we read: “Again, He [Jesus] began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about Him, so that He got into a boat and sat in it on the sea, and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land.”

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So, Jesus is already in the boat. He has been using it as a pulpit all day to teach the crowd. His voice has been amplified by the natural amphitheater of the bay, but now He is exhausted.

From within the boat, some time before He falls asleep, Jesus says: “**Let us go across to the other side.**” Mark 4:35

The “other side” was the place of the Gentiles. Having ministered exclusively to the Jewish people, this boat trip across the lake, is the very first venture into non-Jewish territory.

THE SEA IS A CHARACTER IN THIS STORY.

“And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling.” Mark 4:37

Biblically, the sea is often portrayed as a symbol of chaos: all that opposes the advance of God’s Kingdom – the advance of God’s great restoration movement of peace and human flourishing. In this account, this movement of God’s peace is about to be extended - to the place of the Gentiles – and the sea rose up to oppose Him.

Jesus is fulfilling the prophecy: to be “a light to enlighten the world.” And He is – taking them with Him, leading them into the eye of the storm.

Very deliberately, Jesus has called us into the boat and taken us with Him into the storm. This has been and continues to be a season of great turbulence that has tested and stretched us beyond the depths of our experience and even the breadth of our service.

But if Jesus is any example here, He is showing us that, there will ***always*** be resistance when new ground is being taken for peace and human flourishing. Storms are inevitable whenever we push out with God’s agenda and leave the security of the shoreline. When we obediently follow Jesus, into deeper waters, we should expect it to get a little choppy!

WHAT DID THE DISCIPLES WANT JESUS TO DO?

“And they woke him and said to him, “Teacher, [Not Lord!] do you not care that we are perishing?” Mark 4:38

If you are a fisherman and your boat is filling with water – what do you do? You BAIL out the boat. They want Jesus to get off His cushion and help them **to bail out the boat.**

Because He is not, they presume He does not care about them!

Isn’t this how it feels when we are in a storm and Jesus is apparently NOT answering our frantic prayers for help?

WHAT DOES JESUS DO?

He awoke and spoke directly to the storm: “He...rebuked the wind and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm.” Mark 4:39

The Word that spoke order out of chaos, the living Word that hovered over the face of the waters and said, “Let there be light,” the same voice that spoke to the chaos of the waters and spoke into being ocean and dry land...This same voice now speaks to the fury of the storm.

In the Amplified translation of the Bible we find this moment rendered with the phrase, “Hush!” or “Be muzzled.” And the wind ceased. And there was great calm.

The funny thing is, the disciples are still **afraid!!** So Jesus asks them: “[He said to them], “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?” Mark 4:40

In other words, “You just wanted me to bail you out of the storm. I want you to know the power of God to carry you *through* the storm.”

For the first time I began to see how fear very often seeks to push God aside and take over responsibility for my comfort, care and protection, all of which God has said He will faithfully provide. The Lord very emphatically says, “I, I am he that comforts you!” (Isaiah 51:12).

And yet fear barges in and tries to take over the role of protector, guide and comforter. It’s as if fear climbs up on God’s throne and presumes to say, “Don’t do that; You could get hurt!”

I think for the first time I saw clearly that fear has the most toxic capacity to set limits on our obedience to God. When you think about it, isn’t it often the case that we serve the one we fear?

LET ME OFFER THIS FINAL THOUGHT:

Yes, Jesus led them into the storm – but He went with them. He was never absent – **not for a moment.**

In the heat of battle, in the eye of the storm, God looks us right in the eye and levels with us. And this is what he says: “**I will never leave you nor forsake you**” (Hebrews 13:5).

Let me unpack the unusual force of this statement: *Not once in the past 75 years and at no point in the next 75 years and beyond...Not ever; never, never, never, in any circumstance whatsoever, will God fail you.*

LET ME PRAY FOR US...

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Lord Jesus, we turn away from those moments where we have allowed fear to claim Your place in our hearts. Father we ask that You would sow the truth of Your faithful presence into our hearts. Lift our heads to behold You in the storm; to hear Your voice echo across tumultuous waters, “Be still!” and to encounter Your peace, Your healing and Your blessing. In Jesus’ name, Amen.