

SECOND READING: Matthew 8:23-27

²³ And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. ²⁴ A windstorm suddenly arose on the sea, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves, but he was asleep. ²⁵ And they went and woke him up, saying, "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" ²⁶ And he said to them, "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a dead calm. ²⁷ They were amazed, saying, "What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?"

FIRST READING: Psalm 46

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.

² Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea,

³ though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.

⁵ God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.

⁶ The nations are in an uproar; the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice; the earth melts.

⁷ The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

⁸ Come, behold the works of the LORD;
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.

⁹ He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.

¹⁰ "Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations;
I am exalted in the earth."

¹¹ The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge

This is the word of the Lord. **THANKS BE TO GOD**

“Our Refuge, Our Hope”

*“No matter how dark and widespread the shadows of death, God is with us. To guide us. To comfort us. . . . And to point us to the day when all sit at table together, when former enemies become friends, when abundance overflows and covers the earth. We are bearers of a dream, a vision that refuses to be distorted by hatred, anger, and fear; a dream of forgiveness, love, and righteousness.”*¹ This faithful statement was offered in an address by theologian and cleric, John Stotts on September 28, 2001. He offered it when people were still struggling under the weight of grief and horror and fear and exhaustion following the tragedy of 9-11, when the wounds were still so raw and feelings of anger and desires for revenge so real, when people were in the dark, needing God to come into it with the light of his love and peace and hope.

I am certain that we, you and I, have been there this week. We’ve been there with our brothers and sisters in Israel AND Palestine, for as John Donne so famously said, *“No man is an island, entire of itself; Every man is a piece...a part of the main; Any man’s death diminishes me.”* Yes. We are part of the family of nations, and races and religions. And everyone of us is less today as we’ve felt our stomachs ache with the climbing death toll, as we’ve cried tears of disbelief with the mounting rubble of homes, business and lives, as we’ve recoiled with disgust at the savagery, the heinous crimes, done to innocents by terrorists...we are less today than we were than when we last gathered together.

And it is appropriate to ask what can we do? It is normal to ask, “What, as people of faith, should we do?” Well, brothers and sisters, the best answer I can give you is to look to Scripture, our only rule of faith and practice, and there find answers. In Scripture we read that we can/we should be affirmed that:

1. This tragedy, as all tragedies and human loss, has happened in a world that God loves so much, that God created in freedom. God didn’t cause the suffering just as God doesn’t cause any suffering; but God is participating in it, experiencing it with us. Scripture says, *“If you oppress the poor, you oppress me. I am a husband to the widow. I am a father to the*

¹ John Stott. Quoted in: John Buchanan. *“Remember”* <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2011/091111.html> (accessed 10-13-23).

fatherless.” (Ps 68:5) This means, as Tim Keller, says, “*that God binds up his heart so closely with suffering people that he interprets any move against them as a move against him.*”² But even more than this, we learn in Scripture that Jesus, God’s son, became vulnerable to and involved in suffering when he shared our life. Again, theologian John Stott offers good words, “*In the real world of pain and suffering, how could one worship a God who was immune to it?*” *We don’t know the reason God allows evil and suffering to continue, but we know what the reason isn’t, what it can’t be. It can’t be that God doesn’t love us! It can’t be that God doesn’t care. God so loved us and hates suffering so much that he was willing to come down and get involved in it to the point of death!*”³ Brothers and sisters, this is the promise and the foundation, the premise of our faith, to which Scripture attests, on which we stand.

I think we can also look to Scripture and be directed for there we see that:

2. Life is a great gift which should be lived for the Lord. You can hear the psalmist rejoicing as he says, “*For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.*”⁴ *I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.*” Ps 139:13-14 Tragedies like what has happened, like what continues to unfold in the Mid-East teach us that each day is a gift given to us, each hour an opportunity to live fully and to embrace the days we’ve been given. It is our time to boldly pledge ourselves to be participants in Christ’s divine work in the world, to live not for ourselves but for Him. The 19th c Swiss philosopher, Henry Frederick Amiel, said this, “*Life is short and we have never too much time for gladdening the hearts of those who are traveling the dark journey with us. Oh, be swift to love; make haste to be kind.*”⁴

Did you know that *thousands of years ago, when the Black Plague, the Bubonic Plague, ran through the Roman Empire and millions and millions of people were dying in the cities, it was the Christians who, unlike all the others who were fleeing, moved into the cities to take care of the sick? That's how the Roman Empire began to be converted for people looked upon*

² Tim Keller. “9/11 Sermon” <https://www.suffering.net/keller/htm>. (accessed 10-13-23).

³ John Stott. Quoted in Tim Keller.

⁴ Fredrick Amiel. https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/henri_frederic_amiel_148217

the Christians and said, "See how they love one another." In fact, I'm told that it was in this environment that the hospital was invented, not by the government but by the Church.⁵ Indeed, opportunities to help those who suffer right now.... to give, to pray, to act, should not be let pass by.

And finally, we can look to Scripture to find our own source of refuge and hope.

3. Consider the text from Mt. 8. It's the story of Jesus calming the sea. He and the disciples were on the Sea of Galilee and a very bad storm came up without warning. I understand that due to the geography of the area and the differences in temperature between the seacoast and the mountains beyond, storms can come up very suddenly and be very violent indeed. Now, the disciples were seasoned fishermen, not easily frightened. They were tough characters. However, they were, in this instance, afraid for their lives. We can imagine that they were struggling to fasten down the sails and were rowing furiously to keep the bow pointed into the waves. Certainly, some were furiously bailing water which had already flooded the boat. But throughout all of it, Scripture tells us that Jesus slept in the stern of the boat. He must have been a sound sleeper. *"Don't you care that we're about to perish here?"*, the men yelled, waking him. And Jesus responded with *"Why are you afraid? Have you no faith"*. He then rebuked the winds and waves causing the sea to become calm and still. Order returned to the previously raging waters, and the men in the little boat did not perish that night.

Brothers and sisters, the bottom line is this: that we need not fear. Oh, certainly there are things to be very afraid of and maybe appropriately worried about in life, but ultimately, ultimately, Jesus is saying that in him, we need not fear, we are safe and secure. We will have storms in life, sometimes very, very bad ones, ones which will send us clinging to the sides of the boat together, but we need remember, in those times, that we have our Savior, the One who has gone to the cross for us, sitting in the back of our boats, maybe so quiet we do not notice with the power and peace and love of God for us in him.

⁵ Rick Warren. *Defeating Fear During The Virus Crisis..7 Things to Remember, Rely On, & Do*" March 14-15, 2020.

The apostle Paul once said, *“neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* And I will say today that never has “nothing, no thing”, meant so very much! In times of trouble, God is with us. In all times, God is with us and in the end, we will be with God....forever...forever.

John Buchanan points out that Matthew didn't describe the rest of the voyage, just that they all reached the other side. I guess we don't really know what the rest of the night brought for them. And I, none of us, have any idea what the next week will bring for the Mid-East, nor for Ukraine, for Cameroon, for Sudan and so many other places for that many. We do not know what next week will bring for us, in solidarity with them. Truthfully, I have some real dread. However, what I also have is a belief (I pray that you do too) that with the dawn, with the first rays of sun which appeared over the mountains the next morning, the disciples were able to glimpse the shore on which they would soon arrive. I believe that they now felt a fresh breeze blowing over the calm water and that they felt some peace. They breathed a sigh of relief and thankfulness as the sun heated their backs. And I believe that as they set sail for their destination, they stole a couple of quick glances at each other, knowing glances, because all of them knew now what we know, and that is that with them in that boat, sitting quietly and calmly in the stern, was the One who loved them with a love so divine, so excelling, a love that was greater, more powerful even than death, a love that would never ever let them go.⁶ (Buchanan)

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. Amen.

⁶ John Buchanan.

Take great care to model something of the centuries of wisdom that is our religious tradition and that is to not further in our conversations the impulse to punish, or retaliate against a whole people. That might be the greatest tragedy of all and would give a great victory to those who have done this.