

Jeff's reflection:

In 1986, I attended an international peace conference held in Montreal.

One of the speakers at the conference was Elie Wiesel, Holocaust survivor, author and recipient of that year's Nobel Peace Prize.

During his talk, Wiesel referred to the biblical story of Noah and the flood.

Wiesel said, "I don't like Noah." He said he would have liked Noah, respected Noah, if Noah had refused to cooperate with God's plan of purifying the world by flooding the earth, killing all human beings and all creatures except for Noah, his family and two animals of each species that would be safe in an ark.

Wiesel said that when God said that Noah was favoured and so would live while everyone else would die – at that point – Noah should have said, "I won't go along with that God. I will not be complicit in the genocide of others. If you are going to kill everyone, then kill myself and my family as well. I will have no part of this plan."

As I listened, I experienced a mix of reactions. Part of me was saying, "You can't talk to God that way!! If God says jump, we should ask 'how high?'" Another part of me wanted to applaud someone publicly declaring that the story of the flood is not a nice God story to be used as the cover illustration of children's Bibles. It is a terrifying story of God killing God's people and God's creatures.

I have since come to believe that the first reaction – 'don't talk to God that way' – is not necessarily a Biblical response nor a Jewish response – the Noah story being in what we call the Old Testament, or the Hebrew or Jewish scriptures.

The Old Testament has a multitude of examples of people bluntly talking to God – calling God to account, questioning God; people who do not willingly accept what they have been told is 'God's will'.

If you want to see this, just browse through the book of Psalms. Psalm 4 begins with the psalmist saying, "Answer me when I call God!" – answer me, don't ignore me!

Psalm 6 begins, "God do not rebuke me in your anger, or discipline me in your wrath..." Or, we might say, "God, don't flood the world!"

Psalm 13: "How long O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long will I experience pain... answer me." The psalmist complains about God's lack of attention.

And then there is Psalm 22, which Jesus quotes while on the cross: "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?"

Jesus himself told a parable about a widow and a judge. It is sometimes referred to as the parable of the persistent widow. The widow asked the judge to intercede and enact justice on her behalf against someone she thought was oppressing her. The judge consistently ignored her, but finally gave in because she wore him down with her repeated and insistent request. And Jesus, according to the writer of the Gospel of Luke, held this up as an example of how we should pray to God – just keep on demanding justice!

You can't talk to God that way! – except people of faith, people who have given us our texts of faith, did speak to God that way, did refuse to just quietly accept their lot in life, did say "Where are you God? Help! This isn't right, God!"

Which leads me to the story we have from Mark's Gospel, the disciples in the boat in a storm. They respond like many of the psalmists would probably respond.

Jesus tells his disciples that he wants to cross the sea, so they get into a boat and set out. Suddenly, a great windstorm sweeps across the sea. The water goes from calm to turbulent. Waves reach up from the lake surface and smash into the boat. The boat begins to fill with water as waves wash over its sides.

The disciples don't know if they can keep the boat from sinking or capsizing.

And what is Jesus doing during all this chaos? He is in the stern of the boat, lying on a cushion, sleeping!

But the disciples wake him up. They wake him up saying, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

I think their question falls within the tradition of the Psalms – wake up, where are you, don't ignore us but answer us, why have you forsaken us – or, in this case, why are you sleeping while we are baling the boat? How long will you hide your face from us, O Lord? How long do you intend to sleep while we cope with the storm, Jesus?

I think the disciples' respond as many of us would respond when we are in a storm, when what seems to give our life stability is sinking, when we feel like waves are crashing into us from every side. We want to say "Where are you God? Wake up? Don't you even care that we are perishing, that our world is sinking?"

Then our story, our text, becomes parable. Jesus wakes up and he 'rebukes' the wind – he rebukes, he criticizes the wind for misbehaving and says to the sea, "Peace, be still!" and the wind stops, and the sea calms, and everything grows still.

Then Jesus, who has just rebuked the wind, seems to also rebuke his friends. He says to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

It seems to me that an appropriate answer, and answer in the spirit of the psalmists we have noted, might have been, “Of course, we have faith! We woke you up, didn’t we?”

Now, there are lots of ways of approaching this story. We might say that the story tells us that we don’t have to be afraid; that when Jesus is in our boat everything will be okay. We might say that when Jesus called for peace, he was not so much calming the outside storm, but the inner storms of fear and anxiety raging inside his disciples. We could say that this is an early teaching that we should keep our heads when all about us are losing theirs.

Or we can hear this story as a parable about fear and faith. Parables don’t so much teach a concise lesson as they help us place ourselves in the large story of God.

We can hear this as a story about the storms we encounter. Our world continues to experience the storm of COVID. Even when society ‘re-opens’, many will carry the trauma and scars of being battered by waves – economic loss, job loss, grieving those who have died, lingering pain from the difficulty of being physically absent from others.

It can feel like we are in a storm as many of our assumptions and norms and practices are unravelling – we are waking up to past injustices and dehumanizing systems – white supremacy is unravelling, male privilege is unravelling, rigid definitions of human gender identity are unravelling, and religious and cultural exclusivity are unravelling...

And, in Canada, our understanding of our history is unravelling. The discovery of the remains of 215 children at the site of the Residential School in Kamloops, shocked this country.

One week after the discovery, the Canadian Race Relation Foundation and the Assembly of First Nations commissioned a survey of Canadians. The survey polled 3,000 Canadians. Ninety-three per cent of them said they knew little or nothing about the residential school system in this country.

I did not learn about Residential Schools in my history lessons. I learned nothing of a system designed to eliminate the language and culture of students who had been removed from their families and communities. If I learned anything about treaties, it was the colonial understanding that they were business transactions, not what I now think would be an indigenous understanding that treaties were an expansion of the community and an invitation to share in caring for the land.

We have much to unlearn and much to learn. We are in need of so much healing.

The boat of history that many of us have sailed in, is now pummeled by waves of another story of history.

We can feel as if we are being tossed on the sea. We can feel as if we cannot stay

a float.

In our biblical story, the disciples wake Jesus and say to him, “don’t you care that we are perishing.” I find their words reminiscent of the words of the slaves whom Moses led from Egypt into the wilderness, into that harsh and threatening place where they cried out to Moses, “We are perishing, did you lead us into this place just so we can die?”

Jesus led his disciples onto the sea. Moses led God’s people into a wilderness.

Being in a place of storm, being in a place of wilderness is difficult, but maybe those are the places God sometimes needs us to enter – if we are to be transformed, if we are to let go of the certainties and stories and history that have shaped our beliefs and actions, maybe we need to experience the time of loss, the time when our perception of the world is shaken, is perishing, times when we no longer feel we can control and manage our story.

In those times, the psalmists felt that God had abandoned them, they asked God: why are you ignoring me, why God have you deserted me...but in their asking they somehow acknowledge a deep trust that God is listening, that God must be listening, must be caring, because that is who God is, God cannot abandon them, and those psalms would conclude with psalmists trusting that God was with them now, and would be with them in the future.

Faith is not a guarantee of comfort, of having life consist only of pleasant dreams. Faith is a choice to trust that God is with us even in the times of storm and wilderness.

What many scholars believe is the original ending of the Gospel of Mark is a strange and ambiguous ending – Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James, come to the tomb where the body of the crucified Jesus has been laid, and there a young man dressed in white tells them that Jesus has been raised will be going ahead of his disciples and they will see him again – but then comes the ending, “So they went out and fled from the tomb for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

In the story of the boat and the storm, Jesus asks his disciples about fear and about faith. The end of this gospel speaks of faith and fear, inviting us to decide for ourselves what we do with this empty tomb.

For me, this boat story acknowledges that storms will come, that at times we will feel overwhelmed, that life has fallen apart.

For me this boat story affirms that in the stormy times, it is an act of faith to cry out to God, to ask God to wake up, to wonder if God cares.

For me this boat story invites me into an experience of faith like that of the disciples after the storm is stilled who wonder who is this Jesus that transforms storm to stillness.

This story invites me to never stop wondering, who is this Jesus, who is this Christ, invites me into awe of this God of storm and stillness. And invites me to a faith that does not protect me from experiencing storms, but somehow grounds me into a deep, deep trust that God is present with us even in the storms, trust that when we go through storms and wilderness we go through them with God, trusts that no matter what, we are God's, that God is in storm and stillness, that peace comes, that even death does not stop resurrection, and that fear and faith somehow dance together in the love of God.

In storm, in wilderness, we are in God.

God be with us now and always. AMEN

For Reflection:

How do you respond to the idea that we can challenge God? That we can persist in praying for God to respond?

Have there been times in our life when you felt like you were in the midst of a storm? If so, how did you experience God during those times?

Do you agree that we live in a time of unravelling? If so, what new ways of living and relating do you hope we will embrace in the future?