

August 7, 2005
Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28, Matthew 14:22-33
Dr. Lewis Galloway

“The Alien Face of God”

People ask questions that are hard to answer. As a parent and as a pastor, I’ve been stumped many times. There is one question that seems almost impossible to answer for someone else. I have heard it on the lips of people in pain; when the London subways and buses were bombed, it was there lying in the street along with shattered bodies, broken glass and crumpled metal; I have sensed its presence in the hearts of people whose lives are falling apart. I have seen it hanging in the air between a couple trying to figure out how they will find the strength to put their troubled marriage back together. It is a question that echoes down the halls of domestic court, juvenile court and criminal court. It is a question that lies sleeping in my own heart—and in all of our hearts—only to be awakened in times of serious doubt, personal conflict or great loneliness. Where is God when we need God the most?

Joseph is the son of his father’s old age. He is petted and indulged. While his brothers are tending their flocks away from the comforts of home, Joseph is at home lounging about in his handsome robe with long sleeves and dreaming of his own greatness. I don’t know if Joseph has ever had a hard day. When his father sends him to check on his brothers, it is no wonder that they want to kill him. His older brother Reuben restrains the others and urges them not to kill him but to throw him in a pit with no water. Joseph is at the bottom of a pit, with no relief in sight. His robe is torn; his lips are parched; his throat is dry; his body is covered with cuts and bruises. When you can’t see the stars, it is hard to believe the dreams and promises of God. He wonders, “Where is God when you need God the most?”

It is evening. The disciples are on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus has told them to row to the opposite shore. He has gone away into the hills to pray. As the night approaches, the disciples row with all their might. They are a great distance from the security of the shore. The sea is rough. The waves are pounding against the boat. They are rowing against the wind. They have been struggling all night and still have a great way to go. We can picture their situation. They are tired, hungry, frustrated and a little bit scared. They are anxious to make it to shore. They are simply trying to do what Jesus asked them to do. Now they are in a mess.

Sometimes no matter how hard you try, it just seems like you can’t get anywhere. You pray for a child who is troubled. No matter what you do and how hard you pray, she just can’t seem to get her life together. You have been looking for a job for many months. You have done everything you know how to do: polished the résumé, made all the contacts, asked friends to pray. You wonder how you will make the mortgage, buy shoes for the kids, and pay the medical bills. Another month passes and still nothing happens. Your wife dies suddenly and you wonder how you will face each day alone. Where is God when you need God the most?

Just before dawn, the disciples see a figure walking on the sea. Their anxiety turns to fear. Fear becomes terror. They cry out, "It is a ghost!" Then a familiar voice, the voice of Jesus, says, "Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid." Jesus has seen their difficulty. He has come to help them. In Mark's version of this story, Mark tells us that when Jesus saw their distress, he went out on the Sea for he "meant to pass them by." Mark's expression is strange to our ears. Apparently it was strange to Matthew's ears as well so he did not include it. In Mark's version of the story, it sounds as if Jesus was not going to help his friends for "he meant to pass them by." What we might not know is that the expression "to pass by" is used in the Bible to describe God "passing by" the people in order to show the divine presence and power. In the book of Kings, God "passed by" the prophet Elijah and spoke in the whisper of a small voice to reassure the prophet of God's abiding presence and power. In the 77th Psalm, God is the one who makes a path through the Sea. Mark wants us to see Jesus as the Son of God who has power over the Sea. Matthew changes the expression in order not to be misunderstood. He changes the expression to emphasize Jesus' compassion for his frightened disciples.

Peter is eager to respond to the Lord's presence. He asks Jesus to command him to come to him. Jesus tells him to come. Peter gets out of the boat and begins to walk on the water to Jesus. When the wind and waves buffet him, he begins to sink. Terrified, he begs Jesus to save him. Even when Jesus is right before him, Peter is afraid. Jesus reaches out his hand and catches Peter. The words he speaks must have pierced his heart, "O man of little faith, why did you doubt?" In that moment, they recognize Jesus as the Son of God and worship him.

Kathleen Norris notes that we have all but lost the ancient meaning of fear as reverence or awe in the presence of the holy. We have only the negative sense of the word. Fear means terror to us. Norris writes, "Fear is seen as something that shrinks us, harms us, and renders us incapable of acting on our own behalf (p. 145, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*)." Again and again in Scripture God comes to us with the command, "Fear not!" Norris notes that "in that act of speech, all the complexity of the word 'fear' is revealed: yes, it can stymie us, but it can also set us free. It is fear—in the old sense of awe—that allows us to recognize the holy in our midst, fear that gives us the courage to listen, and to let God waken in us capacities and responsibilities we have been afraid to contemplate (pp. 145-6)."

Rowing in the dark, the disciples do not feel the Lord's presence. Jesus is off somewhere in the hills praying; they are perishing in a storm on the Sea. Even when Jesus comes to them, they do not recognize him. The first thing they experience is fear as terror. It turns out to be terror in the presence of the holy. In the storms of our lives, God may be all around us. When we battle the storms without and the storms within, it is difficult for us to see, to feel, to touch the holy. Sometimes when Jesus comes to us, he comes as a strange, alien presence or a terrifying challenge. He comes to awaken us to new possibilities that we have been too frightened to consider.

Book Three of C.S. Lewis' series *The Chronicles of Narnia* tells the story of a boy named Shasta who has never known his real parents. Shasta has been raised by a cruel fisherman. One night as the fisherman plans to sell Shasta to another evil master, the boy escapes on

the back of a horse. The boy is chased by lions, forced to swim for his life, spends the night among frightening tombs, is terrified in the desert by howling wild beasts, and endures thirst and hunger. Finally he is chased by another lion that wounds his friend. Shasta tells his tale of woe to a Voice he cannot see in the darkness. The Voice says that there was only one lion.

“How do you know?”

“I was the lion who forced you to join with Aravis. I was the cat who comforted you among the houses of the dead. I was the lion who drove the jackals from you while you slept. I was the lion who gave the Horses the new strength of fear for the last mile...”

“Shasta was no longer afraid that the Voice belonged to something that would eat him, nor that it was the voice of a ghost. But a new and different sort of trembling came over him. Yet he felt glad too.” (*The Horse and His Boy*, pp. 175-76)

In taking risks we discover God’s presence. God may come to us in strange and terrifying ways. God may call us to step out in faith, to risk and to become more than we have been. It is a risk to trust that God will provide the new heart and courage you need to forgive your partner and to transform your marriage. It is a risk to believe that even when life feels like you are at the bottom of a pit that God is with you and God has a plan and a purpose for you. It is a risk to have faith that when I give myself to helping others and share my resources with those in need that God will provide for me. It is a risk to believe that even in the face of death we belong to God and we can live our last days in faith, hope and love. It is a risk to believe that we are not too old to take on a new project or too young to volunteer to help others.

Sometimes God comes to us in ways that frighten us. God seems like a stranger before we recognize God as a friend. Could Joseph have possibly believed that those Midianite traders who bought him from his brothers and carried him off to Egypt could have been God’s hands reaching out to save him. It was only later, when Joseph looked back over all the strange turns his life had taken that he could see the hand of God in all that had happened. It was only then that Joseph could say to his brothers, “Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good in order that preserve a numerous people (Gen. 19, 20).”

Sometimes God comes to us in ways we do not expect. Sometimes the ways of God terrify us before they make us whole. Remember the words of Jesus who appeared like a frightening apparition, “Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid.”

We are invited to the bold and sometimes terrifying new world of God’s presence. When we are in the darkest moments of our lives, God has not abandoned us. When we go through difficulty, we are never the same again. Discovering God may mean losing the comfortable ways of the past in order to discover a new future. Jesus invites us to step out of the boat, to face the wind and waves, and to keep our eyes on Him. In faith, Peter took the chance of stepping out of the boat. It was only when he lost his focus on Christ that he began to sink. There is enough temptation and trouble around to sink us all. Through faith, we can become stronger, deeper and more spiritually alive people. Through faith, we may heal old wounds, rebuild our marriages, and find new life.

Yes, the difficult question is: “Where is God when we need God the most?” It is difficult because we cannot answer it for someone else. It is difficult because God comes to us in unexpected ways. Each one of us must meet the Lord in our own way and through our own experiences. I cannot tell you exactly where God will be in your life or in what strange ways you will experience God’s presence. Yet, I can tell you that God is there in the depths of our pain, in the most hopeless of situations, and in the most surprising of people. Sometimes God is like an alien presence: the stranger’s hand that draws you out of the pit; the lion that roars in the night; or the still small voice of silence. The hand that reaches out to you and me in times of distress is the hand of Jesus. He reaches out to us not simply to comfort us, but also to call us into an astonishing and unexpected future.

“Take heart,” Jesus said, “It is I. Do not be afraid.”