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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

June 20, 2021

Year B, Proper 7, Track 2, Revised Common Lectionary

[Job 38:1-11](#)

[Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32](#)

[2 Corinthians 6:1-13](#)

[Mark 4:35-41](#)

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“Why are you afraid?” says Jesus. “Have you still no faith?”

“Don’t be afraid” is a sentence that recurs over and over in scripture. God says it to Abraham and to Moses. The angel Gabriel says it to Mary. Jesus says it to the disciples. And I was reading a reflection on this recently where the author pointed out that there’s more than one way to say, “Don’t be afraid.”¹ “Don’t be afraid” can mean, “Don’t worry, there’s nothing to be afraid of.” Or it can mean, “Yes, there *is* something to be afraid of—but you don’t have to be afraid, because I’m here with you.”

Today is Father’s Day, of course. And parenting is one place where we can really experience this difference. Anyone who loves a small child knows that reassuring in the midst of fear is a big part of the job.

¹ Michael L. Lindvall, “Pastoral Perspective,” in David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season after Pentecost 1* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 164-68.

And there are times when we can really say, “There’s nothing to be afraid of.” The monster in the closet really isn’t there. The bad dream was only a bad dream. But there are other times when we can’t say that without crossing our fingers. No, that dog isn’t likely to bite—but we can’t say it never happens. No, our house isn’t likely to catch on fire—but we can’t say fires never happen. There really are dangers and risks in this world that we can’t make go away.

A few weeks ago during the violence in Israel and Palestine I read a reflection from a parent in Gaza whose child had asked, “Now that the power’s been knocked out, can they still bomb our building?”² Trying to reassure her, he said, “No, they can’t see it in the dark.” But he knew the truth wasn’t so simple.

Today we are baptizing Bobbi Barbara Gagas into the family of Jesus. And I pray that Bobbi will grow up not in places of war but in places of peace, surrounded by the love of her family and friends, able to grow and play and laugh and rest and flourish. Yet there’s no getting away from the fact that Bobbi, like all of us, has been born into a world with storms in it. A world where bad things happen that we can’t control. It would be nice to be able to say to Bobbi today, “Don’t be afraid! Your baptism today will protect you from ever having any suffering or danger or any unpleasantness in your life. These waters are the magic talisman that will guarantee you a stormless sea.”

² Refaat Alareer, “My Child Asks, ‘Can Israel Destroy Our Building if the Power Is Out?’”, *New York Times* (May 13, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/13/opinion/israel-gaza-rockets-airstrikes.html>. See also Ruth Sherlock, “Parents in Gaza and Israel Are Doing Their Best to Shield Kids from the Trauma of War,” National Public Radio (May 25, 2021), <https://www.npr.org/2021/05/25/999811879/parents-in-gaza-and-israel-are-doing-their-best-to-shield-kids-from-the-trauma-o>. News reports indicate that at least 60 children were killed in Palestine and 2 in Israel.

We can't say that.

What we can say to her is that we are here with her. And what we can say, more importantly, is that Jesus is here with her; just as he was in the boat with those first disciples in the storm; just as he is here with all of us who love him.

There's a mistaken form of Christianity out there sometimes called the prosperity gospel. A form of Christianity that says, if you pray enough, if you're faithful enough, God will reward you with riches. God will give you material comfort. God will solve your problems for you. Now that's an attractive message! I kind of wish it were true. But it isn't. You might love Jesus and have faith and you might still be poor. You might lose your job. You might go to jail. You might get cancer. You might, indeed, lose your home in a fire—that's one we know all too well. You might get in a car accident. You might lose loved ones. Even if none of these particular things happen to you, you will grow old, and your body and your mind will start working differently in ways you can't control. You will grieve for people you love. And one day you will close your eyes and die.

Jesus certainly didn't get an escape card from suffering. He prayed in the garden of Gethsemane to be spared it if he could. But he was faithful. And his faithfulness won him not a throne or a mansion but a cross. And because of that we can be all the more sure that he is with us when we suffer. Yes, there are things to be afraid of. But we can still take confidence knowing we have a guide who's been there, and he can lead us safely through.

Yesterday was the 19th of June; Juneteenth, a holiday that's both new and very old. New, because it was signed into law as a federal holiday just this past Thursday. Old, because it's been celebrated for more than 150 years, especially among black folks, because it marks the day, more than two years after the Emancipation Proclamation, more than two months after the surrender at Appomattox, when liberation from slavery finally reached as far south as Galveston, Texas.

So this weekend is a good time, as it's always a good time, to learn from the wisdom of the Black church: a wisdom forged in storms. The storm of more than 300 years of enslavement, trauma and torture; the storms of Reconstruction and Jim Crow, redlining and mass incarceration. A wisdom that knows that Jesus is with us not as an escape from trials but in the midst of them. The wisdom that comes through in the spirituals, like the old song from slavery times:

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen

Nobody knows . . . but Jesus.

Yes, Jesus does know. He knows our trouble.

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen.

And then, we hear the shout:

Glory, hallelujah!

In the midst of trouble, in the heart of the storm, in slavery, from the lips of this song's singer comes a shout of praise. Glory, hallelujah! Because they know who is with them in the boat.

It reminds me of the line in the Prayer Book's burial service, which we said just over a week ago as we buried our sister Rebecca Gbasha. "All of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia; alleluia; alleluia." Even at the grave we make our song. Nobody knows the trouble I've seen but Jesus. Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia. Glory; hallelujah.

"Don't be afraid. Not because there is nothing to be afraid of. But because I am with you always; even to the end of all the ages."