

Sermon 020716 God
Scripture 1 Kings 19: 11-12
Sermon Title The Fog Warning

There is a painting at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston that fascinates me. When I'm looking at it, I have a hard time moving on from it. I have projected it up on the wall so you can see it. The painting was done in 1885 by the American artist Winslow Homer. The painting is called The Fog Warning.

I personally relate to this painting because I own a fishing dory that is now in the backyard of the parsonage and I was a commercial fisherman when I wore a younger man's clothes. But it compels me at a different level that we'll get to. Let's take a look at what is going on.

The work shows a lone fisherman in a dory with two large halibuts that he has caught. This is a very good catch marking a profitable day. You can see off in the distance, the ship that is the fisherman's destination. You can also see behind the ship an ominous fog approaching behind the ship. This is a dangerous situation because if that ship disappears into that fog, our fisherman will be lost at sea. For me personally, of all the different weather that you can get on the water, fog is the worst. They've got technology now to deal with it, but without the technology, fog is completely disorienting. You can also see by the angle of the dory on a swell and the white water that it is a rough sea.

Our fisherman's face is mostly hidden by the hat and the beard but he is looking at the ship assessing what he needs to do. You have the sense that he has been in danger before; he's a commercial fisherman, after all. You can see that there is a determination in his posture. He will get those oars working hard and fast. For me, Homer's painting proves the existence of God.

Unlike many people, I do not find God in a beautiful nature scene. Now I love a beautiful view or sunset or autumn in New England as much as anyone but it does not prove to me the existence of God. If proof of God is in nature, how can we say to victims of Hurricane Katrina or Super Storm Sandy or the earthquake and tsunami in Japan that God was in nature so therefore the agent of destruction.

Those are acts of nature, not acts of God. Nature has no moral component; God does. Now, Scripture backs me up on this. In our Hebrew Bible text this morning, from the first book of Kings. Things had become bad in Israel under the rule of spineless King Ahab and wicked Queen Jezebel. The Prophet Elijah fled to the desert to reconnect with God at Mount Sinai, the God of the Exodus and of the Ten Commandments.

We read, "There was a great and mighty wind splitting mountains and shattering rocks, but God was not in the wind. After the wind, an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake

a fire, but God was not in the fire. And after the fire, a still small voice...”
The voice tells Elijah to go back to Israel and make things better.

Did you hear that? God was not in the storm, but in the still small voice that inspired Elijah to do something he didn't think he could do. God was the still small voice in sending people out in boats to rescue victims of Katrina. The still small voice inspired my wife Meg to lead mission trips for Hurricane Katrina relief and Super Storm Sandy relief. I see God in the still small voice that keeps the likes of Pat Martin and Carolyn Auguston strong, hopeful, and optimistic in the face of their husbands' grave illnesses. I see God in the still small voice that is setting our fisherman on the hard and dangerous task to get himself back to the ship. That's where I see God in this painting. I see God's presence when people are inspired to do things that they didn't know they could do.

So, in saying that God is not in the storm, Scripture and I guess I am saying that God does not control everything that happens in the world. This may be a different concept than you have heard before in church or may carry with you. I have talked about this before, but I think that the idea that God controls everything that happens is entrenched in many believers thinking so I am coming at it again.

I often hear statements like, “It is God's plan.” Or questions like, “Why is God letting this happen? or Why is God doing this to me? or Is

God sending me a sign? or Is God punishing me for my sins?" Oh, there's one more that made me want to punch out the priest at my cousin Gloria's funeral. He said that God called Gloria home. I hope Gloria's granddaughters were not listening at that moment because that priest opened the door for those children to hate God for taking away their beloved grandmother.

No I cannot believe in a God that is in control every single thing that happens. We have free will. That gives us enormous power. People get sick and die. I can't believe God does that. Not only that, I could not worship such a God. Accidents happen. I can't believe God would decide to sheer a bolt on flight 205 and all on board die and flight 207 with the same aircraft lands safely. I can't believe in a God that sends storms and earthquakes. Storms and earthquakes are acts of nature, not acts of God.

Where, then, do I find God? I find God in the quiet heroism of Winslow Homer's fisherman, stretching to the limits of human strength and endurance to do what life calls on him to do. I find God in the willingness of so many people to do the right thing, even when the right thing is difficult, expensive, or unappreciated, and to reject the wrong thing no matter how tempting or profitable.

Where does an ordinary person find that willpower unless God is present, motivating that person to surpass himself? This is what came

to me when I first started going to church after being unchurched for decades. I came to the realization that I cannot do this alone. It is too hard to live a good life without help. God is where that help is, there are other places, for me, my wife for example, but it starts with God.

I find God not in the tests that life imposes on us but in the ability of ordinary people to rise to the challenge, to find within themselves the qualities of soul, qualities of courage they did not know they had until the day they needed them.

God does not send the problem, the illness, the accident, the hurricane, and God does not take them away when we find the right words and rituals with which we beseech God. God sends us strength and determination to do things of which we did not believe ourselves capable, so that we can deal with, or live with, problems that no one can make go away. I see God as Most High but not omnipotent. We are not passive creatures merely acting out God's plan but active participants hearing the still small voice and acting on it.

Where does Jesus Christ fit into this way of thinking of God? Perfectly. There is a big difference between curing and healing. Curing is what docs and nurses do, it is the physical person. Healing, for lack of a better way of saying it, is balancing your accounts with the world: other people, your God and yourself... to be at peace with the world. Even though the stories about Jesus in the Gospels seem to depict him

curing; the Gospels always talk about his healing ministry. Jesus was all about healing us and his efforts brought him all the way to the cross where he was crucified for us.

Let me tell you a story that I told to the 'sermon talk back' group (an informal session where folks reflect on the sermon together) after the recent sermon I did on grief.

It was the day I learned what it means to be a Pastor. It was at my last church. I was with a woman who had just lost her husband at a relatively young age. It was the day of her husband's death. Through tears, she asked me, "Why would God do this to such a good man?" I started to speak of the things that I have spoken of in this sermon.

Then, I caught myself and said, "How about a hug." It was a long hug in which she cried on my shoulder. I came to realize that for her, the arms of God were around her. There was no need for theological talk. No need for explanations of why things happen. She needed God in the hardest of times. There those of you here that have received similar hugs from me.

God is needed in the hardest of times. That is true for you and for me and for our favorite fisherman. Thank God that even when our feet are on terra firma that God is, in the still small voice, the beacon when we feel lost and 'at sea.'. AMEN