

We are in the season of what some Christian denominations call Ordinary time—ordinary as in the everyday moments that fill the gap between the holidays or higher holy days. The readings in this post-Pentecost season take us back through some of Jesus' highlights in ministry. We revisit how these flashbacks fit in with our daily lives. How do the stories of Nicodemus, picking grain on the Sabbath, healing a withered hand, casting out demons, harvesting grain, and growing mustard seeds blend with cooking dinner, going on vacation, going to work, volunteering, or caring for your family? What is God's message in these post-Pentecost weeks?

Today's collection of passages is partly an odd assortment of themes. The Psalm and Gospel passages are parallel, similar stories of people on boats crying out for deliverance from storms.

The Old Testament passage is a tiny snippet from Job where God recounts the complexities of the foundations of the Earth and oceans—I don't think I've ever heard a sermon focused on Job.

The New Testament passage has Paul, once again in a bit of an exasperated tone, trying to persuade the fickle and hard-nosed Corinthians to stick to Jesus and the cross.

At the surface, the passages seem straight forward.

God is our all powerful Creator, commands the wind and waves, and desires our full commitment.

Rather than gloss over these passages, I decided to accept the challenge from Pr. Dan at St. Paul's Lutheran in Ellicottville, NY to dig a bit deeper. While I was on retreat last week near the relaxed, quaint ski resort town about two hours East of Erie, I popped in to church on Sunday to hear about the parables of the grain and mustard seed. Pr. Dan quoted Eugene Peterson who described parables as ticking time bombs. You catch the surface story, but then as the passage sticks with you through the week, God brings about deeper and deeper meanings and truths that explode in your brain. Parables aren't just fables with one perfect moral to the story. I like to think of them more like prisms or kaleidoscopes that have a wide variety of depth and truths. If you're a fan of the Shrek movies, ogres and parables are both like onions—they have layers.

How do these stories of God's power, authority, steadfast love and praise relate to our ordinary, post-Pentecost lives? What's there in the layers beneath the surface of these stories?

Because that's what all humans really want to know: Do you care about me God? As big as you are and concerned with the needs of all the Earth, its animals, insects, people, weather, and well...the whole universe...what about me?

Like me, you probably know the gist of the story of Job. Life for Job is great. He has a healthy family, business is going well and life is enjoyable. Then tragedy strikes. The livestock are stolen and killed, his family is crushed when the house collapses on them, and Job contracts an illness of sores all over his body. For the next ~28 chapters Job and his friends question and debate this tragedy trying to make sense of what is happening to Job. Why did such tragedy befall this decent, God-fearing person?

Now that's relatable right? We've all had moments where everything collapses—natural disasters strike (like the wildfires, tornadoes and tropical storms of late), people are laid off from work, chronic illnesses are diagnosed, couples get divorced, there's a health concern or surgery is required, people wrestle with mental health, or someone close to you dies.

Like Job, we're left feeling crushed, confused and lost with questions of: "Why did this happen?" "What went wrong?" "How did I end up here?"

Because that's real life.

We like to dream and focus on good things, but if we're honest, real life is full of thorns, pain, trouble, disappointment and hurt.

That's not really the moment for Jesus to be sleeping in the back of the boat when the storm is raging, the wind is blowing us off our feet and we're being crushed by tumultuous waves. Where's the promise that you'd be with us always to the end of the age God? (Matthew 28:20) Because in the midst of tragedies when we're sitting in a pile of manure, we want some of that pulling us out of the miry clay and setting our feet upon the rock. (Psalm 40:1-3)

Sometimes bad things do happen to good people. Glossing over and ignoring the tragedy doesn't bring healing. We can ponder tragedy and suffering all our lives and never get a clear answer this side of heaven about why suffering happens. Here on Earth, we see dimly in a mirror and understand only in part (I Cor. 13:12). The deeper layers of these passages are that while we may not get a clear answer to "why this or why that," God doesn't leave us there in the pile of manure.

Jesus is IN the boat WITH us.

God sits with us in the manure pile and offers us a new perspective.

"Be silent! Be still! Then the wind ceased and there was a dead calm." (Mark 4:39)

I Corinthians 10:13 reminds us that "God is faithful and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it."

The why of tragedy and suffering is not as important as our response to the difficulty we're facing.

Do we stay caught up in the situation with the "I can'ts & why me," or do we focus on God's provision to move us forward and heal?

The challenge always in life is to redirect our focus from I/me/my, toward God/Jesus/Holy Spirit—whether in good or bad times.

Not that we can't or shouldn't ask why—

God can handle our questions.

It helps us lament and process our pain/anguish.

It helps us understand the world (science) and improve (learn from mistakes, quality assurance).

It's okay to visit the island of "why this & why that," but we don't live or dwell there. We live in the land of God's abundant promise.

We are called to live by faith, not by sight (II Corinthians 5:7)

To focus on heavenly things, not earthly ones (Colossians 3:2)

To be saints, not sinners (II Corinthians 5:17-21).

No matter what we face in this life, be it tragedy or blessing, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:35-39)

Because we are convinced that Christ Jesus has died for all, therefore all have died, so that those who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Christ Jesus who died and was raised. (II Cor. 5:14-15)

The confusion is that, in this world, we are caught up in both the now and the not yet. We live divided lives as our old, distrustful ways and suffering erode, and the new, faith-filled ways emerge.

Our distrustful selves see the world as a project to take charge of and manage. That is the way and weight of the law enticing us. The law is an all or nothing, cut and dry mentality and a heavy burden as all is placed on our shoulders. The law requires us to be responsible for all the good and all the bad. With the law, there is no “you were close,” “that’s good enough,” or mulligans like in golf.

That’s mercy and mercy and the law are polar opposites like oil and water.

Thankfully we aren’t called to manage everything—we aren’t in charge!

Thank **God**—relief!

Thank God—praise!

Isaiah 55:8-9 remind us that God’s thoughts are not our thoughts, nor are God’s ways our ways.

Psalms 23:1-2 reminds us that the Lord is our shepherd and makes us lie down in green pastures.

John 15:16 reminds us that we did not choose God, but God chose us.

Jeremiah 18:6 reminds us that we are clay in the hands of God our Potter.

We are called to be dependent on God for ALL—to surrender to being the clay and not the potter.

When we’re done trying to be the Mayor of “why this & why that” island,

When we’re done trying to be in charge of the

Earth/animals/insects/people/weather/universe,

When our desire for control ends, we can focus on being created humans and not the Creator God.

When we get out of the way and stop blocking the Gospel, then God can do amazing things!

The clay pots that we are can be put to their good use of carrying the Gospel and watering the seeds, the Word of God, that it might flourish and yield 100 fold (Matthew 13:23).

Will we become conduits of God's grace and mercy acting like megaphones, or will we be the basket that covers the candle of God's light and tries to hide/block it?

Will we hallow God's name?

Will we ask for God's kingdom to come and God's will to be done?

[Which, if you read the Bible, can sometimes be a scary prospect!]

Will we ask for our daily bread? [For all we have in our possession is a gift from God.]

Will we ask for forgiveness and forgive others?

Will we call on God to save us from times of trial and to deliver us from evil?

[Just like Psalm 107 directed us to do in today's reading.]

For **Thine** is the kingdom, power and glory forever.

This season of Ordinary time and post-Pentecost reflection on Jesus' teachings is designed to continue God's work of drawing our attention away from ourselves (the I/me/my troubles & the why-this & why-that, and the monstrous uncertainty they bring us), and to focus on God as our Shepherd and Creator.

The readings of this post-Pentecost time challenge us to find everyday ways to keep our perspective on our Creator God. What's one way you can take one step toward surrendering to and focusing on God this week?

Perhaps a prayer before eating—often we have very little part in the growth and preparation of the food we eat that God has provided us.

Perhaps a moment of gratitude to count our many blessings—pause during the day to think of three things you are grateful for and watch how that changes/reshapes your perspective on life!

Perhaps reciting a Bible phrase or verse

When your anger is triggered—like James 1:19 “Be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger.”

When you are faced with tragedy/trouble—like Jeremiah 26:14 “As for me, I am in your hands. Do with me as seems good to you Lord.”

When you feel stuck or trapped—like Acts 16:25 “At midnight in prison Paul & Silas were praying and singing hymns to God.”

Live into the challenge of this new life in Christ to surrender all that you are and all that befalls you to God our Creator and Potter. Amen.