

**JOHN 3:11-17**

*'Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you\* do not receive our testimony. 12If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.\* 14And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.\**

*16 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

*17 'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

**PSALM 29 - NRSV**

*Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings; ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.  
Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name; worship the LORD in holy splendour.*

*The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders,  
the LORD, over mighty waters.*

*The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.*

*The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars; the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.  
He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox.*

*The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.  
The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness; the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.*

*The voice of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare;  
and in his temple all say, 'Glory!'*

*The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD sits enthroned as king for ever.  
May the LORD give strength to his people! May the LORD bless his people with peace!*

**The Word of the Lord...**

This psalm is considered to be one of the oldest. It is a hymn to God – a doxology. The storm evokes the power and majesty of the Lord as ruler of the universe! The psalm is giving God praise by proclaiming God's almighty power and sovereignty. The Lord rules like a violent storm – snapping trees in half, flashing flames of fire, shaking the mountains, stripping the forest bare... and then watching over the flood.

I do not find the comparison of God to an angry storm very comforting.

In March of 1993 I lived in a tiny home in Palm Harbor, Florida – about one mile away from the Gulf of Mexico. I was at home when I noticed the wind starting to pick up and the skies beginning to darken... this is not a rare occurrence in the tropical climate of Florida. I watched some tv, ate some dinner and eventually went to bed. During the night I woke up a couple of times and realized that there was quite a storm going on outside – eventually I fell back asleep.

The next morning I woke up early to silence... except for a very faint thumping that seemed to be coming from the front end of the house. I quickly got out of bed and got dressed with my plan being to head over to the Gulf of Mexico to see if the storm from the previous night had caused there to be any waves in that usually flat body of water. Why not? It was a Saturday and the Gulf was only about a mile away and while I was at it I could check out what was making that thumping sound on the side of a house...

I threw open the front door and proceeded to just stand there, staring in shock. The Gulf of Mexico had come to me! And there thumping on the side of the house was a pretty decent sized rowboat bobbing in the water... thump – thump – thump.

It is called the No Name Storm and although my story has a funny ending, the storm was anything but funny. Some of you may remember it as the blizzard it became as it headed up the northeast coast.

What made the storm particularly brutal was that there was no warning. The forecasters didn't predict it, let alone name it. No one saw it coming.

This storm destroyed 18,000 homes and caused over \$500 million in property damage. On Florida's west coast 26 lives were lost including six from one family who were all attending a family reunion at a coastal park.

This storm, this kind of devastating power is what the psalmist is exalting? In the contemporary translation, *The Message*, it is written: *God thunders across the waters... God's thunder smashes cedars. God's thunder spits fire. God thunders, the wilderness quakes...*

Then the Psalmist writes: *May the Lord bless his people with peace!*

Peace? The storm just came in without warning!

The storms in our lives come without warning:

The phone rings at an odd time of night.

A specialist is called in during your routine doctor's visit.

Divorce papers show up at the door.

*May the Lord bless his people with peace?*

What does it mean to worship a God who has that much power? Explain that God to me.  
Why should I love **that** God?  
Why should I trust that God?

*Christian Doctrine* tells us that God being this powerful is a good thing. A God that is this powerful can snatch victory from defeat.  
A God this powerful can prevail with strength even in the midst of weakness.  
A God this powerful works through insignificant people and through a dismissed man on a cross.

This is what *Christian Doctrine* says. My teenage niece's doctrine says, "p-shaw. Whatever."

When you're in the storm it doesn't really matter what *Christian Doctrine* says. We just want to know why.

Why did the accident happen

Why is the kid sick?

Why is the heart broken?

Those are the questions we want to know the answer to.

And all too often even the experts come back with the answer, "We just don't know."

And so the question soon becomes: Why should we put our faith in a God whose power is compared to thunder that smashes cedars and winds that strip the forest bare when all most of us really want is to lead peaceful lives as far away as possible from the storm."

We are a complex people who desire a simple, understandable God. We crave a God that we can picture and label – make understandable and safe. And so depending on our mood we worship the "Great Heavenly Granddaddy who does everything for us and makes our lives smooth and painless and easy." Or we tremble at the feet of the "Great Heavenly Tyrant who terrorizes us by his arbitrary, unpredictable, power and glory. Both these gods are dead idols."

And yet there are elements of truth in them. "On the one hand, (God) is in fact infinite, almighty, sovereign, sufficient in himself, able to do whatever (God) pleases. And on the other hand, (God) is in fact a God who draws near to us and makes himself known in an intimate way as the God who wills to help and be our companion. (God) is neither a Tyrant, nor a Granddaddy, nor a combination of both. But (God) is in fact a God who is both free from us and yet bound to (us); far above, yet with (us); distant, yet near; powerful and yet loving, loving and yet powerful at the same time"<sup>1</sup>

And as I wrote this and researched this and read more about this paradox of a free but bound, far above yet with us, distant yet near, fully powerful yet loving God I had to stop and ask myself... "How is this helpful?"

How does the equation of power and love = peace?

God loves us so much that God chose to save us.  
And God actually has the power to do it.

It is called salvation and as we get beat down by the rain and blown by the wind we wait for it. We hope for it. We trust in it knowing that God is good, **all the time**. All the time, **God is good**.

In the chaos of the storm we know that God has promised to us salvation and although we are tempted to nail down God to exactly what that will look like we do not have to because God **will** bring salvation.

God has made and continues to make the promise. And **God does not break promises**.

So we wait. Hebrew for 'wait' actually means: wait and trust. My friend Matt translates it this way: bet on it. God is coming for sure, bringing salvation: bet on it.

God has made us a promise in the midst of the storm.

God will bring salvation.

When we are in the storm we know in our minds that God is with us and will repair our broken hearts.

God will bring salvation<sup>2</sup>.

The following is taken from a book about grief and the storms of life and God's place in them. The author - in one swift, horrific car accident - lost his wife, his mother and his 6 year old daughter. He writes:

"...God came into the world as a vulnerable human being. God was born to a woman, Mary. He was given a name, Jesus. He learned to walk and talk, read and write, swing a hammer and wash dishes. God embraced human experience and lived with all the ambiguities and struggles that characterize life on earth. In the end he became a victim of injustice and hatred, suffered horribly on the cross, and died an [humiliating] death. The sovereign God came in Jesus Christ to suffer with us and to suffer for us. He descended deeper into the pit than we will ever know. His sovereignty did not protect him from loss. If anything, it led him to suffer loss for our sake. God is therefore not simply some distant being who controls the world by a mysterious power. God came all the way to us and lived among us."

"The God I know experienced pain and therefore understands my pain. In Jesus I have felt God's tears, trembled before his death on the cross, and witnessed the redemptive power of his suffering. The Incarnation means that God cares so much that he chose to become human and suffer loss, though he never had to. I have grieved long and hard and intensely. But I have found comfort knowing that the sovereign God, who is in control of everything, is the same God who has experienced the pain I live with every day. No matter how deep the pit into which I descend, I keep finding God there. (God) is not aloof from my suffering but draws near to me when I suffer. (God) is vulnerable to pain, quick to shed tears, and acquainted with grief. God is a suffering Sovereign who feels the sorrow of the world..."

God understands suffering because God suffered."<sup>3</sup>

God is powerful enough to be above the storms.  
Yet God is loving enough to make the choice to suffer the storm with us.

But don't take my word for it:

*But now thus says the Lord, he who created you...*

*Fear not, for I have redeemed you;*

*I have called you by name, you are mine.*

*When you pass through the waters I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.*

*For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior...*

*You are precious in my sight. I love you. (Isaiah 43:1-4)*

The Word of the Lord... **thanks be to God.**

*May the Lord give strength to his people. May the Lord bless his people with peace.*

**In the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit - Amen.**

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<sup>1</sup> Shirley C. Guthrie, Jr. *Christian Doctrine*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1968. p.111.

<sup>2</sup> Rev. Matthew M. Fry. *The Days are Surely Coming*. Sermon preached on 11/30/03 at Norcross Presbyterian Church, Norcross, GA.

<sup>3</sup> Gerald L. Sittser. *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, 1995. p.142-3.