

When I was 4 or 5, my parents took the family on a trip to Disney World. My memories of that trip are fuzzy ... I vaguely remember my dad driving all night from Asheville to get us there by morning, and several times waking up in the back seat to the sight of the same gas station and my parents whisper-fussing at each other about map-reading skills and needing to ask for directions.

The one clear memory I have is of our ride on Space Mountain. My dad and I were in one car, my mom and older brother were in the one in front of us. This ride had been open for only a few years at this point, but it was the most popular ride in the park ... however the seats has already been worn slick and smooth by those brave enough to ride it. And as I was only 4 or 5 at the time, I don't think there were any height or weight restrictions to ride it back then. Space Mountain (like many roller coasters still) has a lap bar that you pull down securely against your thighs that makes the loud metallic ratchet sound as it locks into place.

I suppose I ought to note that I was a skinny little thing ~ I *\*might\** have been 25 pounds. My dad has always been rather thin, too, but despite that lap bar being almost flat against the seat of the car, there was a lot of wiggle room for a scrawny kid like me.

The roller coaster space voyage began as it still does: gentle at first, a big turn ... round and round we go, then up we went ... (chick-a-chick-a-chick-a-chick) ... a short stop ... a big plunge and a strobe light flashing and more big turns ... By this point, I'm no longer on the bench next to my father. The weaving of the roller coaster car has wiggled me down that slick bench and onto the floor at my father's feet. I do not exaggerate when I say that I hold onto his legs for dear life.

No time to worry about that: quickly down, to the left, to the right ... and dark. **The world goes black.** It's loud. Everyone is yelling. I am, too. And no one notices.

When you cry for help on a rollercoaster, when it's a sincere cry of distress, shouldn't someone stop the ride? Shouldn't someone somehow be watching? Is it not possible to stop the trauma for the passenger so that they can leave, or must they endure the entire ride so that everyone can have the full experience? Is it simply a fidelity to protocol to keep the ride going until the cart arrives at the

station? Or is it to the benefit of all those on the collective journey to keep going until the very end? I wonder...

When trauma happens and we face the tough storms and roller coasters of our life, it is normal to doubt our faith and question if maybe God's compassion and care has been all used up in the care of others, or if some cosmic protocol must be followed, or (worse) if our Lord simply doesn't notice. Or care.

Jesus' closest friends accused him of this very thing when they were being tossed about like a toy on the Sea of Galilee two thousand years ago. After working without much of a break for an extended period of time, Jesus had taken a boat out on the lake with his disciples, and fell asleep while the others presumably hung out and fished and goofed off. It must have been a good day to be out, as the Scripture makes clear that there were a number of other boats on the water that day, too.

But these were the days before we could forecast severe weather systems, and a storm came up unexpectedly. It apparently was a particularly fierce one, even for the seasoned fishermen among them who knew how to read the wind and water, how to keep the boat from capsizing, how to wait out the storm until it passed. And yet even they were scared. The waves were beating the boat so that the boat was getting swamped. And there was Jesus, nestled in the back - maybe with a pillow under his head - sound asleep. His friends needed him.

The single greatest comfort of my faith is knowing that hard truths can be spoken to God, and that I can be real in my honesty, in my criticism, in my anger when things don't go according to plan (\*my plan\*). If anyone can take the brunt of my harshest words and the force of my rawest emotions, it's God. After all, God already knows the thoughts of our hearts and the longings of our souls. Our deepest secrets are already laid bare before God - so there's no point in dressing up our feelings and trying to be polite. Prayers that come out of anger or fear or hurt have their own (shall we say) "authentic" vocabulary. And that's okay, because we can trust that God can take it.

And it is from that same trust that the disciples speak up. They are afraid. The storm is far too strong, even for seasoned fishermen like Peter, Andrew, James and John who have spent their lives on this lake. The boat is being tossed about, the wind and waves are overwhelming their ability to navigate to safety and the crew have no idea what to do about it. They unceremoniously wake him up to yell their accusation, "Do you not care?!?" Their anger, fear, and disillusionment are palpable.

“Do you not care?!?” **That** is an honest prayer.

Jesus *appears* to have fallen asleep on the job. I hear in the disciples’ plea a frustration that Jesus has spent all his energy taking care of everyone else and their needs are being ignored ~ that they are in some way invisible to Jesus. “Don’t you care about us, too?” they seem to be asking. “Because if you cared, you would do ... *something*.”

But Jesus is not ignorant of their fears and anger. He is present. He listens. And he acts.

It may appear in sudden events that grieve us (and threaten our sense of God's nearness and care) that God isn't doing anything. These experienced, veteran fishermen were appropriately frightened: their circumstances were beyond their control and they couldn't make sense of how events were unfolding around them. In our lives, too, things come at us that are beyond our control. They may make no sense, and God may seem to be silent. The lap bar, the very thing that has provided us with an illusion of security, that (in theory) will to keep us tucked in and safe isn't adequate. We slip and slide and find ourselves in a sorry heap, with what feels like little to hold on to. It is natural to doubt. To be angry or scared. To feel deep loss that things have not gone as expected.

I was little more than a bony, quivering heap in the footwell of that rollercoaster car, but the fun wasn't over yet. I will later learn that that Space Mountain has what is called a 'swirling wormhole' in that pitch black nightmare of a ride, sometime before or after the tunnel of mirrors and psychedelic strobe lights – I can't quite remember anymore. As we finally eased into the 'station' to disembark, my Dad asked, “are you alright?” Still hanging on to his legs for dear life, terrified out of my mind, I respond, “I'm scared, but I'm ok.”

I think that must be how the disciples are feeling in those moments following Jesus' rebuke of the wind and command that the sea be still. In my mind, the disciples are trying to pull themselves together, doing an inventory of themselves – checking their bumps and bruises, their hands blistered and bleeding from the effort to hang on, trying to make sense of what had just happened. They are scared, but they are ok. Only when they realize this, they ask “Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

For whatever the reason, it's pretty clear that this incident with the waves and the wind tipped the disciples off that Jesus was not just a skilled healer and prophetic

teacher, but was in fact Almighty God, the Creator of heaven and earth, and as such, the one who could command the elements. The roller coaster ride of that storm-tossed boat was bad, but faced with the reality that they were in the presence of Almighty God ... well, that was something altogether different.

“Because realizing that they’ve been hanging around with God all along, suddenly they may suddenly have started to wonder about other things. Maybe they wondered if all along he’s been able to read their minds, know their thoughts, see the envy and the anger and the things they didn’t say (but wanted to) that weren’t particularly kind. [Perhaps they realized that they were scrawny and puny and slippery, that maybe the things they’ve done and said and thought are going to have consequences well beyond the momentary].”<sup>1</sup>

Being in the presence of God Almighty “is what everybody [longs for], and what nobody wants.”<sup>2</sup> Being in the presence of God. It’s what we desperately want, and yet what can terrify us, too.

Jesus heard their cries for help to save them from the turbulent weather. He also heard what lay beneath the surface of their outcry: their doubt and fear that their wellbeing was somehow not important.

But we see in this story that that just isn’t true. Jesus does care ~ for those who had not yet chosen to follow him ~ and certainly about his dearest friends. Because we see that Jesus does act ~ he calms the storm and preserves the safety of not only those in his boat ... but also for everyone else in those other boats who are also caught up in the storm.

Jesus’ question “Why are you so afraid?” is rhetorical. He knows why they were afraid, why they questioned his devotion to them, why they feared. Rather it gives his disciples a chance to reflect on how they will choose to live their faith going forward. As the Gospel unfolds, we see that Jesus doesn’t abandon them as they grapple with their doubts, their lack of understanding, and their very natural reactions to life’s varying circumstances. Jesus stays with them through it all.

And Jesus will stay with each of us through all the challenges and hardships we face as well.

---

<sup>1</sup> Scott Hoezee (adapted paraphrase)

<sup>2</sup> Fred Craddock, speaking of John the Baptist

Throughout the Scriptures, we find one example after another of those who have cried for help, who have screamed and yelled at God about the sudden storms and circumstances of their lives. The prophets, the Psalmists, and the disciples all approached the Holy One with their anger, their fear, with their brutal honesty, trusting that God would hear them. And every time, God responds ~ perhaps not when or how they want God to respond ~ but God does respond.

And we can rely on the presence and love of God that is large enough and strong enough to endure our hopes **and** our fears, both our praise **and** our rebuke, our joy **and** our anger, our faith ... **and** our doubt. We can trust that we can approach God in the midst of **our** storms, in the throes of our grief or fear or guilt or shame, to say whatever is on our hearts, trusting that we will be heard and we will be loved no matter what.

Because God is a God who is always present. God is a God who always listens. God is a God who (in God's own time and in God's own way) will calm the storm and bring us to comfort and peace. There will be storms. We will be scared. But when all is said and done, we will be ok, too.