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**Sunday 20 June to Sunday 27 June 2021**

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Sunday 20 June 2021

# Sleeping through a storm

by Pastor Joshua Pfeiffer

**But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, ‘Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?’ (Mark 4:38).**

Read Mark 4:35–41

In today’s reading, we find the disciples amid a chaotic, fear-inducing storm. The wind was blowing ferociously, and the waves of water were crashing into their boat. If you’ve ever been caught in a serious storm, you know this is no joke – let alone when you’re out on a huge body of water. There is something truly awesome when the forces of nature are unleashed in their fury, and we realise just how little control we have over our own circumstances.

But during the storm, there is another problem. It troubles the disciples, perhaps even more than the physical elements, namely, the apparent lack of care and concern from Jesus. He’s asleep! Isn’t it true that problems we have in life are made even worse by the reality that those close to us don’t seem to treat them with the same seriousness? This is even more so the case when it comes to God.

In response, Jesus exercises his divine power by speaking peace and calmness to the storm, as well as calling for greater faith from his disciples. They recognise they are in the presence of no mere man, and the awe previously evoked by the storm is redirected to Jesus himself. The final question of the text is the main point: ‘Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?’

We know who he is. He is Christ Jesus, the Son of God, and our Saviour. He has come from the Father on a mission to restore peace to the chaos of this sinful world by dying, rising and sending his Spirit. Indeed, there is much in this world to fear with threats all around. But let us never mistake the apparent inactivity of God for his indifference to our plight. On the contrary, no matter what we face, our Lord Jesus promises to be ‘in the boat’ with us, and he has all authority. Trust him.

**Heavenly Father, my life sometimes feels like I’m in the midst of a storm. I fear, and I lack faith. Be near to me in your Son Jesus, and by the power of your Spirit, bring me comfort and strengthen my faith. In Jesus’ name, Amen.**

Monday 21 June 2021

# God’s promises and our prayers

by Pastor Joshua Pfeiffer

**All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers (Acts 1:14).**

Read Acts 1:1–14

God makes promises to us, but he also asks us to pray for things. How do these two go together? On the one hand, a person may think, if God has promised something, surely there is no need to pray. On the other hand, someone could suggest that even if God has not promised a certain gift, perhaps we could still coerce him if we only pray hard enough? Both take us down spiritually unhelpful paths. We see the middle path in our text today, where God’s promises and our prayers are kept together.

In Acts 1, we have the account of Jesus promising the gift of the Holy Spirit before his ascension. He says this will be the power the disciples need to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. But even though this promise of Jesus is as clear as they come, when the disciples gather again in Jerusalem, what do we find them doing? Not simply going about recreational activities or even piously waiting in silence. Instead, we find them devoting themselves to prayer. It doesn’t say explicitly what the content of these prayers was, but I sense that this connects with the promise of the Spirit they just received.

In other words, the promises of God and our prayers can never be played off against each other, but instead, belong together. In fact, it is precisely because God has promised something that we can be confident and bold in asking him for it. Martin Luther picks up on this reality in his explanations of the first four requests in the Lord’s Prayer. Namely, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, and give us today our daily bread. For example, he says, ‘God comes to rule as king even if we don’t ask for this to happen. But in this prayer, we are asking: “Father, come and rule over us”’.

Are you struggling to pray? Why not read a little section of Scripture, look for a promise of God, and turn this into a prayer? The promises of God and our prayers belong together.

**Heavenly Father, thank you for the promises in your word. Help me not to use them as an excuse to neglect my life of prayer. Lead me, by your Spirit, to pray according to your promise. In Jesus’ name, Amen.**

Tuesday 22 June 2021

# Responsibility and faith

by Pastor Joshua Pfeiffer

**And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles (Acts 1:26).**

Read Acts 1:15–26

A man I know came out of a renewal movement many years ago, and he didn’t belong to any particular congregation. When he was encouraged to commit to a local church community, he wasn’t sure where to go. He narrowed it down to two Lutheran congregations near where he lived. Finally, he decided by praying and then carrying out a version of what’s described in our verse as ‘casting lots’. He’s been faithfully attending the congregation on which the lot fell for these past 30 years or so.

It’s important to notice he didn’t cast lots between hundreds of faith communities listed in the phone book. Rather, he took his Christian responsibility seriously and so narrowed it down to congregations within reasonable distance to him where he was confident that he’d be nourished in his faith. However, he then combined this human responsibility with an act of faith in God.

Similarly, as the 11 remaining apostles sought to replace Judas, they didn’t cast lots between the hundreds or thousands of people who had come into contact with Jesus. Instead, they had rather strict criteria for narrowing them down. We read, ‘So one of the men who have accompanied us throughout the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us – one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection’ (verse 21). Having responsibly done the work of identifying suitable candidates, they then cast lots between the final two as an act of faith – commending the final decision to God.

As far as I can tell, we do not have a clear biblical instruction for making life decisions by casting lots. This is more descriptive than prescriptive, as are similar examples in the Old Testament. Yet, we are instructed to be responsible with what we’re given (for example, Matthew 25:14–30) and to have faith (for example, Matthew 6:25–34). This scene in Acts 1 is an example where human responsibility and faith in God comes together in an interesting way. I’d encourage you to consider how they fit together in your life.

**Heavenly Father, life often seems full of dilemmas and decisions I need to make. I know I need to be responsible and discern the best way forward, but I also want to trust wholeheartedly in you. Please help me, by your Spirit, to do both. In Jesus’ name, Amen.**

Wednesday 23 June 2021

# Spiritual experience and God’s word

by Pastor Joshua Pfeiffer

**Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel (Acts 2:15,16).**

Read Acts 2:1–21

Have you ever had an unusual experience as part of your Christian life and not known quite what to do with it? People have dreams, intuitions and promptings, and it happens more often than some may realise.

How are we to think about the place of spiritual experience in our Christian life? People can be tempted to treat their experience as the most important thing of all, even if it calls into question aspects of God’s revealed will in the Bible. Others can be suspect of all spiritual experience and would relegate it only to the realm of subjective emotional response. Yet when we turn to the Scriptures, we indeed find extraordinary spiritual experiences occurring but always being tested and interpreted by the word of God.

A classic example is the well-known day of Pentecost itself. The gathered disciples experience ‘a sound like the rush of a violent wind’, ‘divided tongues, as of fire’, and the ability ‘to speak in other languages’ (verses 1–4). These were the phenomena that attended the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, and it was indeed an extraordinary spiritual experience for those gathered.

Yet, notice the experience itself was not enough. Everyone responds by saying, ‘what does this mean?’ (verse 12). Others around them concluded they were drunk! To interpret the extraordinary events, the Apostle Peter directs the community to the word of God, in this case, from the prophet Joel. It’s when their experience is brought under the authority of this revealed word that it finds its proper place and meaning.

And how does this word interpret the miraculous events of Pentecost? It points them to Christ, as the work of the Spirit always does. All the extraordinary and marvellous signs of the Spirit’s coming at Pentecost were to serve this end, that many more would call on the name of the Lord, and so be saved (verse 20).

**Heavenly Father, I’m not always sure what to make of the strange experiences I and others I know have in our lives of faith. Help me, by your Spirit, to interpret them by your word to us in the Bible. In Jesus’ name, Amen.**

Thursday 24 June 2021

# God brings good out of evil

by Pastor Joshua Pfeiffer

**Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified (Acts 2:36).**

Read Acts 2:22–36

Why is there evil and suffering? This is, of course, one of the classic questions of the human heart. And these days, it is one of the chief protests against the Christian faith. Perhaps you struggle with this in your own life. Although the Bible never explains this in the way a modern person might like, the question gets addressed in various places in interesting ways (for example, Job; John 9; Luke 13:1–5; Matthew 13:24–29,36–40). More than this, one thing that is very clear in the Scriptures is that God can and does bring good out of evil. Several verses make this point explicitly, but the ultimate example is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The verse above includes the final words of the Apostle Peter in his sermon on the day of Pentecost. Peter does not sugar-coat his message. Twice in the sermon, he tells the crowd they are responsible for crucifying and killing Jesus. He stresses that God demonstrated who Jesus was through his ‘deeds of power, wonders and signs’ (verse 22). And yet, they still killed him. He is the one through whom all things came into being and who came out of love for the world. Yet when we human beings could get our hands on him, we killed him. The murder of the innocent Son of God is an act of pure evil on the part of humanity. But through this and from this, God brought resurrection, life, forgiveness and salvation. God brings good from evil.

The evil and suffering in the world is very real. Perhaps there are things in your life right now that make it hard to go on. God does not promise to take it all away, any more than he could promise his Son another way than the cross (Luke 22:42–44). But he does promise he is always at work to bring good from the terrible things that happen in this broken world. As a baptised child of God, your life is now incorporated into the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus. This means God is always bringing resurrection and life from the effects of sin and death.

**Heavenly Father, how long will you allow the evil and suffering in this world to continue? Help us by your Spirit to look in faith to our crucified and risen Lord Jesus as we face trials in our lives. In Jesus’ name, Amen.**

Friday 25 June 2021

# Baptism and the Holy Spirit

by Pastor Joshua Pfeiffer

**Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 2:38).**

Read Acts 2:37–47

The Book of Acts is a wild ride! As the Spirit of the living God gets unleashed, the early Christians are struggling to keep up with the pace. On almost every page, we read of people coming to repentance and faith, seeking baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit – often in the most unexpected of places. One interesting theme to trace through – and try and make sense of – is the relationship between baptism and the Holy Spirit in the Book of Acts.

In the verse above from the day of Pentecost, the gift of the Spirit is part of the one event of repentance, baptism and receiving the forgiveness of sins. But by the time we reach Samaria in Acts 8, we find the people there being baptised but not yet receiving the Spirit. The Apostles have to come to lay hands on them before the Spirit comes. In Acts 10, it’s the reverse order with Cornelius and his family. The Spirit is poured out as Peter is proclaiming the gospel to them, and so Peter then baptises them after this. It seems that the one thing we can say for sure from all these events is that while God is always free to intervene how and when he chooses, the early church understood baptism and the Holy Spirit to belong together.

On several occasions, I’ve encountered people who have some measure of faith in Jesus Christ and a desire to live as his disciple, yet, for one reason or another, have never been baptised. What do we do? We give thanks for the work of the Spirit in their life, and we encourage them toward baptism, just like in the Book of Acts. On the other hand, when we encounter people who have been baptised as infants but show little interest in the Christian life, we can encourage them toward greater participation in the life of the Spirit (Romans 8:14) – because baptism and the Spirit belong together.

If you’re reading this and have never been baptised, why not seek out a local Lutheran church, and ask them if you, too, can receive this precious gift?

**Heavenly Father, thank you for the gifts of repentance, baptism, the forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit. Renew these gifts in us, and please be at work in those who live apart from you. In Jesus’ name, Amen.**

Saturday 26 June 2021

# Will the dust praise you?

by Pastor Joshua Pfeiffer

**‘What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness?’ (Psalm 30:9).**

Read Psalm 30

How bold are your prayers? This verse above has always struck me as one of the most daring prayers in all the psalms, perhaps in the entire Bible. Can you imagine yourself praying like this?

The psalm overall is one of praise and thanksgiving for God’s deliverance in a time of trouble. The psalmist retraces the journey from where he was strong and secure, through entering a time of trial and suffering where it seemed as if the Lord had ‘hidden his face’. It was in this dark situation that the psalmist cried out for help using the words in the verse above. He says something very striking and somewhat surprising, at least for many modern Christians. He asks God what the point would be in letting him die. If he is allowed to waste away and turn to dust, who will be left to praise the Lord? Who will be able to tell others how good and faithful the Lord is? The dust certainly can’t do that, at least not in the way one of God’s chosen people can do.

This fits into a bigger theme in the Bible, namely that God acts not only out of love and compassion for his people but also for the sake of his glory, reputation and name. He acts so that others may come to know who he is. Think, for example, of the famous Psalm 23, where all that the Lord does as our shepherd is ‘for his name’s sake’ (Psalm 23:3).

The Lord heard the psalmist’s bold prayer. He continues by recounting the wonderful deliverance he experienced with these words: ‘You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever’ (verses 11,12).

Be humble and reverent before the Lord in prayer, but be bold, too, like the psalmist. And having been delivered, let us never be silent about all the Lord has done for us.

**Heavenly Father, thank you for all the ways you have brought me through times of trouble. Please help me, by your Spirit, to always boldly call on you in times of distress and to tell of your faithfulness. In Jesus’ name, Amen.**

Sunday 27 June 2021

# Strange ways

by Chelsea Pietsch

**She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse (Mark 5:26).**

Read Mark 5:21–43

In this passage, Jesus heals a woman who had been bleeding for 12 years. He also raises a 12-year-old girl from the dead.

When we read these miraculous accounts, we can quickly forget the suffering that came before the glorious ending. Yes, it’s wonderful that people got healed. But why did they have to suffer so much in the first place? Why did God not spare or relieve them from their heavy trial?

Can you imagine 12 years of bleeding? The poor woman would have been anemic. She would have lacked energy and found her day-to-day life hard to manage, as those who suffer chronic conditions understand. The Scriptures also tell us that she had spent all of her money on doctors’ bills, so perhaps she experienced anxiety about finances as well. And that’s to say nothing of the shame and humiliation she would have felt for having such a condition in the first place.

And what about the 12-year-old girl? What about her parents? If Christ was going to heal her anyway, why didn’t he intervene before she was dead? Why didn’t he act before there had to be the ‘crying and loud wailing’ that we read about? Why didn’t he push through the crowd and come quicker? Why, Lord, why?

We all suffer in this life. One trouble passes, another rolls in. Sometimes our suffering feels bearable. Other times way, it feels way too heavy. While God doesn’t necessarily cause our suffering, he also allows it. Otherwise, why would he not swoop in and intervene before suffering befalls us? Is he just allowing the natural consequences of our free will to play out?

Despite the pain of suffering, the Scriptures remind us that it need not be in vain. In fact, it may even be the path that leads to transformation.

Had this woman not bled for so long, maybe she wouldn’t have ever been desperate enough to turn to Christ. Similarly, had his daughter not been dying, maybe Jairus would never have sought out the Lord for help.

Can you think of a time in your life where your suffering led you to cry out to God with desperation you’d never known before? Are you still in that dark place, or do you look back now and see how God mysteriously used your suffering to draw you closer to himself and to make you more like him?

**Dear Lord, your word tells us that if we share in your sufferings, we may also share in your glory (Romans 8:17). Sustain us in our suffering, and help us not lose sight of your promised glory. Amen.**