

“Asleep at the Switch”
Pentecost 3b Proper 7
Mark 4:35-41

Pastor Bruce K Modahl
Grace Lutheran Church
June 21, 2009

In Jesus' Name.

I titled my sermon today “Asleep at the Switch.” I looked around for examples. This being Fathers' Day I am obligated to use an example I found from the most famous TV father, Homer Simpson. The Simpsons is a cartoon, which has been on TV for a generation. In many ways Homer is the anti-father, but, in his defense, he is fiercely loyal to his family. As far as I know the Simpson family is the only family on any television program that goes to church. Homer works at the Springfield nuclear power plant. He fell asleep at the switch one day. He was in a stupor after eating a whole box of donuts. As his head hit the console of his workstation he bumped the universal blackout button. It would have been worse but his drool caused the circuit to short out so it was only a regional blackout instead of continent wide.

Homer has a real life counterpart in the train engineer who was busy text messaging as his train blew through several stop signals and ran into another train held up at a station. This is no longer a cartoon but a real-life tragedy. This metaphor goes from comedy to local tragedy to cosmic catastrophe if it is God who is asleep at the switch.

That is literally what happens in the Gospel reading. Jesus sleeps through the storm as his disciples struggle to haul the sail down, bail water, and keep the bow headed into the wind. All the while waves threaten to sweep them overboard. Finally they wake Jesus with the plea, “Don't you care that we are perishing?” That was Job's lament as well. In ten spare verses the narrator of the book of Job recounts the death of Job's children, their spouses and his grandchildren. Marauders carried off his flocks and herds, all his wealth. His health broke down. For the next thirty-five chapters Job calls on God to pay attention. You might remember, that was the lament of Willie Loman's wife in Arthur Miller's play, “The Death of a Salesman.” As Mr. Loman's life unravels, his wife says to their sons, “Attention must be paid.” Job calls on God to pay attention. “What happened to me and my family was not fair. What did I do to deserve this? Why, O God, did you allow this to happen to me?” And for thirty-five chapters God is silent. God must be asleep.

We seem to be hard-wired to consider the world and our own lives in terms of what is fair and unfair. Should someone take our turn at the four-way stop, we say, “Hey, no fair, you greedy person” (or something like that in stronger language). We expect the punishment to fit the crime and to receive pay commensurate with our work. “You reap what you sow,” after all. That is in the Bible. Obedience to God leads to blessing and disobedience to punishment. That is what one theologian calls “the baseline of moral coherence.”¹ Throughout these thirty-five chapters Job’s erstwhile friends take up that line. “Job, you must have done something to deserve these catastrophes. God does not allow these things to happen for no reason.” Job stoutly maintains his innocence. Through it all God remains silent. I’m wondering if this is not a common experience. When we assail God with the unfairness of what happened to us God is silent.

This metaphor, asleep at the switch, has its origin in the person whose job it is to work the lever that switches a train from one track to another. One way is a clear ride to the correct destination. The other way is the wrong way and, perhaps, a collision course with another train. Playing along with this metaphor: When things go wrong in our lives God is asleep at the lever that if pulled would send us down the right track on which we would live free of pain and suffering.

What if that is not the switch? That occurred to me when God finally spoke, thirty-seven chapters into a forty-two chapter book. God ignored Job’s questions and his friends’ arguments. God rather proclaimed God as the one giving order to the chaos. God laid the foundations of creation and did all the survey work. God shut in the sea when it burst out and prescribed bounds for it and set bars and doors and said, “Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped.” Here God restates what we hear at Genesis 1. In the beginning was chaos. All was formless and void. And Genesis one tells us the Spirit of God swept over the face of the chaos and God spoke. Here in Job 38 God speaks from the midst of the chaos. What chaos? What whirlwind is the narrator talking about? The only storm in sight is that which engulfs Job’s life. From the midst of that whirlwind God speaks. The switch is not between what is fair and unfair but between chaos and order. God speaks to give order to the chaos. From it God calls forth an orderly creation. That creation was disordered by sin and is under the God’s judgment. God’s judgment is part of God’s renewal program. God speaks judgment and promise.

¹ Walter Brueggemann in a review of *Reading the Hebrew Bible After the Shoah*, by Marvin A. Sweeney. The review is in the June 16, 2009 edition of *The Christian Century*.

God speaks and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us in our chaos. So we find Jesus in the boat with his disciples in the midst of the storm as they make their way across the lake. Once again God spoke to the chaos, "Peace, be still." "Who is this that even wind and sea obey him," the disciples ask. They should have known by then. Surely we know by now when our lives and the world around us turn chaotic. It is clear; this is God. So rather than thinking God asleep at the switch, we find God in the midst of the chaos, ordering up a new creation.

There is an alternative to the usual questions, "Why me; what did I do to deserve this; and, how can God allow such things to happen?" Consider Paul in the second reading today. Paul did not sit on an ash heap asking, "Why me?" He lists the afflictions he has endured to this point: beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights and hunger. The list will grow longer. He has not yet endured shipwreck and being for days adrift at sea. The last affliction he suffers will be for others to tell. He was beheaded by orders of the Roman emperor. He does not use these as a platform for self pity. To the contrary he uses these to commend himself to the congregation at First Church Corinth.

Just before today's second reading Paul wrote, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" Paul knows through Jesus, crucified and raised, God is ordering a new creation with Christ at the head. By our baptism in to Jesus' death and resurrection we take up citizenship in God's new order. We still have a foot dragging behind in the old realm, which is disordered by sin and death. This old creation and our lives, however and wherever they are disordered by sin, are encumbered by God's judgment. But that word of judgment is not for the sake of tearing down alone, but to make way for God's new creation. Paul knew and we know that whatever storms we experience are but the groaning of that old creation in the midst of which God is ordering the new. Moreover Paul knew that as a part of the body of Christ he and we are enlisted in God's renewal project.

God is present in the chaos of our disordered creation through the Holy Spirit who calls us by the Gospel, gathers us around Word and sacrament, enlightens us with the Spirit's gifts, keeps us in faith, and sanctifies us, that is, sets us apart as Christ body, the church, for the sake of the world. God is not asleep at the switch but present through us in the storm. In the chaos death creates we proclaim death does not have the last word. God has been in conversation with us throughout our lives through the Word that is Jesus. After death has spoken its loudest God

intends for the conversation with us to continue. In our afflictions, sickness or disability, we come to see the power of God manifest. We have witnessed that in the lives of those in the Chronic Illness group at Grace. We pay attention to those whose lives are unraveling. By our presence in God's name we make God present in their chaos. In our own lives we know those corners and pockets of life that remain in bondage to that old realm of sin and death. We bring those to this table and to that font. We put those things to death with Christ by confession in order that these sectors of our lives might be reordered as a part of God's redeemed and new creation. And so we use Christ as he wants us to use him. A storm many of us feel and fear right now is caused by the financial meltdown that has occurred around the world. Many of you have told me your incomes have declined. I look at those numbers in the bulletin and ask, "What will we do?" That fear too must be confessed as idolatry. Here is a quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer. "In ordinary life we hardly realize that we receive a great deal more than we give, and that it is only with gratitude that life becomes rich." So, in the midst also of this whirlwind, we offer with joy and thanksgiving what God has first given us – our selves, our time, and our possessions, signs of God's gracious love. And we ask God to receive them for the sake of him who offered himself for us, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.