



# First United Church of Oak Park

## **The Storms of Life**

Psalm 107: 1-3, 23-32

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My parents first took me on an airplane when I was just a few months old, and I've been a pretty regular flyer ever since. I like to travel by plane. Since I was young, every flight has felt like an exciting adventure. I've never found it difficult to sleep on planes, and, unlike my husband, I don't get motion sickness. So, some headphones, a nap, a snack, ear plugs, a good book, and before I know it, I've reached my destination.

There was this one time, years ago, I don't remember exactly how old I was or where we were going, but the skies were clear blue for takeoff. It was a smooth transition from runway to sky, and soon we were floating among the fluffy, cotton-candy clouds. I easily dozed off with the sun warming my face.

A while later, I awoke to the sound of a crying baby and turbulence that violently shook the plane. The seat belt light was illuminated, and the sunshine out the window was gone. Rain beat relentlessly against the window and the previously fluffy clouds were dense, grey, and foreboding. I saw a bolt of lightning pierce one of the clouds, illuminating the entire terrifying scene that we were smack in the middle of. Another lightning bolt struck, even closer to the wing this time. I felt fear course through my body. People talk about fight or flight as our responses to fear, but really there is a third option: it's freeze. The fear that overtook me left me frozen in my seat — not that fight, or flight, was really an option anyway.

Besides the crying baby, I recall the plane being really quiet. There was radio silence from the pilots who were busy navigating the storm, and the rest of the plane seemed to all just be holding its collective breath, while white-knuckling our arm rests, with closed eyes — waiting, wishing, dare I say praying — for this nightmare to be over. Yes, praying.

In that moment, I began praying without even knowing I was doing it. With absolutely nothing in my power to control, I started a dialogue with my creator. Most likely a strange, incoherent babbling of a dialogue, but I'm sure God got the gist of it.

I wonder if you have ever been in a similar situation. I wonder if, like me, you started talking to God, without even thinking about it, leaning on your faith in God's ability, God's power to somehow see you through, deliver you beyond that moment, or at least comfort you, be present with you in your time of fear, in a space where nothing was within your control. Essentially, I wonder if you have ever spontaneously written your own Psalm.

The book of Psalms is a rich and varied collection of poetry from the life of ancient Israel. In it we find expressions of a wide range of emotions and feelings: joy, sorrow, relief, oppression, hurt, amazement, yearning, betrayal, fear. It is arguably the most-loved book of the Hebrew Bible, probably because it's a testament to the complex dynamics of humanity's relationship with God and with one another.

There are four major types of Psalms: hymns of the community, hymns of thanksgiving, community laments, and individual laments. Psalm 107 is a community hymn that celebrates God's graciousness in delivering the community of faith from exile in Babylon. It contains stories of deliverance.

However, our lectionary scripture reading today was not the entirety of Psalm 107, so we only get one story of deliverance. But this one story draws a close parallel with Jesus calming the sea in the gospel of Mark. If you are familiar with that story, you no doubt thought of it while listening to the scripture read.

In the verses left out of our reading today are three other scenarios or stories of deliverance. However, unlike those, in this scenario of a raging storm, no fault is attributed to the group caught in the storm; their predicament is not said to be the result of any sin or wrongdoing. In fact, the trouble is specifically said to be brought about despite the lack of any cause for punishment. In other words, "stuff" happens.

When stuff happens, when we are bombarded with, knocked down by, drenched, and nearly drowning in the raging storms of our lives, it's easy to lose hope, for our courage to melt away, to stagger, stumble, and struggle, to find ourselves at our wits' end.

Sure, there are times when we are caught in a literal storm like when I was on that airplane, but I'm more concerned with the metaphorical storms in life.

Maybe you have recently come out of one of these storms, maybe you are currently navigating one, maybe the storm is a relentless, never-ending, series of treacherous waves ...

- This pandemic
- The death of a loved one
- Systemic racism

- Financial stress
- Mental health struggles
- A life-altering diagnosis
- A toxic relationship

The Psalm says that when those who were in that storm were at their wits' end ... they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and she brought them out from their distress; she made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed. They were glad because they had quiet ...

I have no idea how long the white-knuckling turbulence on the plane lasted. It felt like hours, but it may have been just five minutes. Coming through that literal storm happened much quicker than probably any one of our metaphorical storms. And we know that a literal storm will pass, the weather will change, the plane or the boat will move beyond the turbulent spot, but that logic doesn't translate to the metaphorical storms we battle. Unfortunately, we all know too well that simply crying out to God does not bring a swift and just end to the distress we experience.

But doesn't that part of the Psalm sound lovely ... she brought them out from their distress; she made the storm be still, the waves of the sea were hushed. It was quiet ...

How comforting that sounds, how hope-giving, how powerful.

In their moment of need, the people in the Psalm chose to believe in the power of their faith in God, and to lean on it. In the Gospel parallel when Jesus calms the storm, he is this power of God personified. The disciples experienced the power of God through Jesus.

In our storms, how do we experience the power of God?

For me, on that airplane, I experienced the power of God through my faith, through knowing that God would hear whatever I had to say and wouldn't leave me alone in my fear. I find that this has also been true for me in the metaphorical storms of my life: when my father-in-law underwent open-heart surgery, when my grandmother was diagnosed with cancer, when my uncle was diagnosed with cancer and died six weeks later.

Our faith does not guarantee the storm will cease the way we want it to or even at all, but the power we experience is in knowing we do not cry out in vain, in knowing that we are not alone. That in itself is an empowering thought, that our faith, our prayers, have the power to bring God's presence nearer to us, to comfort us — that is worthy of a community hymn, of a celebratory Psalm.

She brought them to their desired haven.

Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,  
for her wonderful works to humankind.

Let them extol him in the congregation of the people,  
and praise her in the assembly of the elders.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.