

“Always With Us”

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Based upon Daniel 3:8-12; 19-27; Matthew 14:22-33

A storm was brewing in the disciples’ hearts long before the real one swirled around them on the Sea of Galilee. It started to build when Jesus was rejected by those who knew him in Nazareth. Then it grew when Herod killed John the Baptist, the greatest spiritual leader of their day. Then it darkened when 5000-plus hungry people showed up uninvited to the very place in the Galilean countryside where the disciples and Jesus had retreated to try to process it all. By the time the crowds were miraculously fed, the energy around Jesus was chaotic in the extreme. People in the crowd were clamoring for more and speculating about whether Jesus was a great rabbi, a magic miracle-worker, a prophet, or something else, while the disciples were worrying that Jesus’ new-found popularity was going to move him to the top of Herod’s hit list. It was all quite overwhelming. Sensing the turmoil’s affect on his disciples, Jesus forced them to get into a boat and head out to sea while he dispersed the crowds and prayed. “Go get out of here” he said.¹ Then, just when the disciples thought they were safe again, back to being a bunch of fishermen at home in their boat, the wind and the waves began to swirl around them and the sea turned against them.

I have always thought that the story we just heard of Jesus walking on water and calming the storm was just one of the many miracles stories the gospel writers included to illustrate that Jesus was God. Only God can walk on water, so it is a pretty persuasive illustration. But after seeing the movie version of the popular book, The Shack,² a couple of weeks ago, I now think that Jesus may have been trying to teach his disciples about more than his divine identity. The Shack is a heart-wrenching story by Wm. Paul Young about a father, Mack Philips, who is so overwhelmed by grief, guilt, and rage after his youngest is murdered, that he can barely function.³ Sensing this, God, whose triune nature is portrayed in both the book and the movie by an African American grandmother, a man-Jesus, and an Asian woman named Sarayu, as the Spirit, invites Mack to a retreat of sorts to work through his issues. They tell him they love him, but Mack is still overwhelmed by doubt and anger. So Jesus suggests that he take out a boat on the nearby lake. As soon as he is out in the center of the lake, however, instead of finding peace, Mack finds that his life is in danger. The lake is filled with grisly nightmares about his children which turn the water ink black, and then begins to break apart his boat. He is sinking and terrified when Jesus starts to talk to him again. Let’s watch [**Video clip of “boat scene” shown**].⁴

Now I do not generally believe that God uses the weather as a tool either to teach or to punish us. But the parallels between the Bible story of Peter getting out of the boat to walk on water with Jesus after his ship almost sinks in the storm, and Mack getting out of the boat to walk on water with Jesus, are close enough that the movie has made me wonder whether the Gospel

¹ In the Greek it says Jesus “forced” the disciples to “jump” into the boat.

² *The Shack*, movie, dir. By Stewart Hazeldine, (TIK Films, 2017).

³ Young, Wm. Paul, The Shack (Newbury Park: Windblown Media, 2007).

⁴ *The Shack*, “boat scene” available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G1OHyINxuRQ&t=250s>

writers were trying to teach us something with that Galilean storm, or whether perhaps Christ took advantage of the brewing storm that day to make a point. I wonder this because when you look at all the stories which come before this one, and realize all that the disciples had been experiencing, it becomes plausible that Jesus sent his disciples out on the sea for the same reason that the Jesus in the movie did.

Jesus knew they were overwhelmed and that they needed to confront the swirling chaos inside themselves as well as around them. So it is possible that Jesus sent them to experience externally what they were experiencing internally, sort of like an object lesson about God and faith in the extreme. Water in their culture was an ancient symbol of chaos, and a threat that according to Scripture only God has the power to remove. So perhaps instead of sending the disciples away to escape the chaos, Jesus sent them into the brewing storm so that he could show them not just that he was God, but also that he was going to be with them always, even in the midst of the worst chaos when it seemed as if they were alone and in danger. “Look at me,” the movie Jesus advises Mack. “Keep your eyes on me. You are imagining a future in which I am not with you. That doesn’t exist. I told you I would be with you always remember?”⁵ In the Bible, Jesus conveys the same kind of message with his appearance in today’s text.

Notice how the storm develops in the biblical story as soon as the disciples are separated from Jesus? His absence made the perceived threats to the disciples seem worse. But by showing up walking on top of the watery chaos just when the disciples needed him, Jesus showed that neither distance, nor lack of boat, nor storm could separate the disciples from him and God’s love. “Don’t be afraid,” Jesus says when he sees them worrying that he might be a ghost or demon, “*Ego eimi.*” In the Greek this can be translated, “It is I.” But it also can be translated “*I am,*” the name of God. “Don’t worry,” Jesus says. “I am here. I am God. God is with you and can still the storm.” His words were enough to give Peter the courage to get out of the boat at the very time most people would be clinging to it. Jesus’ words were even enough to help Peter walk on top of the watery chaos himself, at least for a time.

What a difference it makes when we believe that God is with us in the midst of a storm! What a difference it makes when we feel that we are not alone when the winds are howling. It makes such a difference that it appears that human beings have been hardwired with extrasensory perception which enables us to perceive the presence of a miraculous helper when we are facing extreme or threatening situations. Scientists call this phenomenon “Third Man Syndrome.” There are hundreds of stories of people who were saved from death by mysterious companions, voices, or invisible presences which comforted them and showed them the way to endure. Author John Geiger, in his book [The Third Man Factor](#),⁶ has collected many of them, including the experiences of famous people like Charles Lindbergh and Antarctic explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton, as well as lesser known mountain climbers, prisoners of war, 9-11 survivors, and others. Shackleton’s famous story of being able to find his way to safety over frozen mountains because an encouraging guide who appeared unexpectedly on the scene, inspired poet T.S. Eliot to include a line in his poem “*The Waste Land*,” which reads:

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Geiger, John, [The Third Man Factor: The Secret to Survival in Extreme Environments](#) (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2009).

Who is the third who walks always beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead, up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you,
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded
I do not know whether a man or a woman—
But who is that on the other side of you?⁷

Elliott got the number of people in Shackleton's party wrong, but his poem gave birth to the term "Third Man Syndrome" for this phenomenon. Now, regardless of how many people are involved, too many of these "Third Man" experiences have been recorded to deny that they happen.

Scientists have tried to explain away these mysterious experiences by saying that they are caused by quirks in our neurological wiring, of course. They have said the "Third Man" is a projection of our psyches, caused either by a break down in the sector of the brain which distinguishes our own bodies from the rest of the world or by a magnification of the mechanism in the brain which creates the sensation of phantom limbs into a full-scale corporeal reproduction of ourselves. But while neurologists can provoke in patients a vague sense of not being alone when they poke these parts of their brains, they have not been able to generate in anyone's mind, let alone vision, a wise, benevolent guide who can persuade them to jump through fire, survive shipwrecks and storm, or find the way home across a forbidding, unfamiliar landscape.⁸ Even if they could, that wouldn't rule out God's involvement in my mind. Whether God hardwired our brains to be able to create the help we need, or actually comes to our side in tangible ways in times of trouble, is kind of beside the point. The phenomenon still points to God ensuring that we are not alone, and that is how most of the people who have these experiences interpret them. They believe that God or an angel of God was with them.

Geiger did not include in his book the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, but I'm sure if they could have been interviewed back then they would have interpreted their own experience as a moment of divine intervention because their story reads like the first-recorded incident of "Third Man Syndrome." One minute Nebuchadnezzar is throwing his Jewish captives in the fiery furnace because they won't worship a statue he set up as a god, and the next minute he is shocked to discover that they are fine and not alone in the furnace. "Was it not three men that we threw bound into the fire?" Nebuchadnezzar asked his royal henchmen incredulously. "But I see four men unbound walking in the middle of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the fourth has the appearance of a god." According to the text, that experience did more than save the three faithful who were being punished; it also saved Nebuchadnezzar, because he could not deny the power of Yahweh afterwards. Personally I find that last part harder to believe than the-extra-man-with-them part of the story. But as was the case with the walking on water story,

⁷ Eliot, T. S., "*The Waste Land*," (1922), Poets' Corner, theotherpages.org/poems, retrieved from <http://theotherpages.org/poems/eliot01.html>.

⁸ John Geiger Interview, NPR, (Sept. 2009), retrieved from <http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=112746464>.

the point in this story is to illustrate that when we know that God is with us, really know and believe that we are never alone and put our trust in God, then it changes how we react to the threats around us.

Do you know that God is with you in this way? Do you really believe this? If we could stare into the big brown eyes of Jesus like Mack does in the movie clip, then I think it would be easy for all of us to believe and either risk the furnace or step onto the water. It is much harder to confront the chaos when we cannot see Jesus in person. But these memorable bible stories exist in part to help us to keep our mind's eye on God when we cannot keep our actual eyes locked on Christ. The authors wanted to teach their audiences the lesson that Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, Peter, and the others learned about God being with them. *Daniel* was written for the Jews experiencing tremendous, life-threatening persecution under Emperor Antiochus Epiphanes IV. *Matthew* was written when the Jews who were following Jesus were being tested because they were increasingly being kicked out of the synagogues for doing so. At both times in order to be faithful, you had to be able to trust God and weather the storm. So these stories proclaim, "God is with you. Don't focus on the overwhelming chaos swirling around you or like Peter did you will start to sink. Look to God and remember that no matter what is going on in your life, there cannot be a future where God is absent. God may not prevent the fires and the storms, but God will be with you in them and that will make all the difference."

The only caveat to this good, life-saving news that we need to keep in mind when we feel the heat rising or the wind picking up is that God will not force us to recognize God's presence, or to follow God's lead. That is up to us. Mack discovers this later in the movie when he tries to walk on the water by himself. He is a dismal failure. "Remember you need to do it *with* me," Jesus advises him when he can't. Similarly Geiger records a story about a mountain climber who had been abandoned by unwilling Sherpa guides. The climber wrote in his journal about how a mysterious new guide showed up to help him when he was left alone and snow-blind in his tent. He was so relieved that he made the guide dinner and spent the night talking to him. But in his journal for the next day, he recorded that he had decided to pursue the summit on his own instead of following the guide down the mountain. He never made it.

"Take heart, it is I," Jesus called to his disciples in the midst of the storm. "Do not be afraid..." It was an unforgettable lesson not just about who he was, but also about the importance of not trying to go it alone. "Remember I am with you always, even to the end of the age," he would remind them again as he disappeared from view after the resurrection. Always means always—even in the fire and in the storm, even when we cannot see the big brown eyes we long to see. Trust and believe Christ is with you, reach out, hold tight, and follow; for we cannot go it alone, and by the grace of God, we don't have to. Amen.