

WHERE IS GOD'S HELPING HAND?

The Rev. J. Donald Waring
Grace Church in New York
The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
July 29, 2018

Then (Elisha) took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, saying, "Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?" (2Kings 2:14a)

In the Collect of the Day we have addressed God as the protector who rules and guides us. How does God protect and rule and guide us? How does God intervene in our lives? Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah? Someone else who wondered about the same question was Soren Kierkegaard, the 19th Century Danish philosopher who wrestled mightily with the questions of human existence, and the strange ways of God. One Sunday afternoon he went to church and listened carefully to a sermon about God's protection. He took the preacher's advice literally, and it almost got him killed. Listen to what he wrote:

"Never lose courage! When troubles pile up most appallingly about you, you will see a helping hand in the clouds" – Thus spoke the Reverend Jesper Morton last evensong. Now I am in the habit of traveling much under the open sky, but I have never seen anything of the kind. A few days ago, however, while on a walking tour, some such phenomenon took place. It was not exactly a hand, but something like an arm that stretched out of the clouds. I began to ponder: it occurred to me that if only Jesper Morton were here, he might be able to decide whether this was the phenomenon he referred to. As I stood there lost in these thoughts, a passerby addressed me and said as he pointed up to the clouds, "Do you see that tornado? They are very rare in these parts; sometimes they carry whole houses away with them." "The Lord preserve us," thought I. "Is that a tornado?" and took to my heels as fast as I could. I wonder what the Reverend Jesper Morton would have done in my place. *(from Either/Or)*

Where is God's helping hand? Where is God's protection? When troubles pile up most appallingly about us, when disease or death curtails a life, when loneliness and despair and grief and pain plague what should be our happy times, when a marriage falters, when a job is terminated, when faith fizzles, where is God's helping hand? Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah? We can be amused at the thought of a befuddled philosopher pondering the significance of an "arm that stretched out of the clouds," and then fleeing in terror upon learning that the phenomenon is in fact a tornado bearing down on him. But the issue he ponders is a real one for people of faith: What kind of help can we expect from God? When troubles pile up most appallingly about us, where is the helping hand of God?

In the Gospel of Mark we've heard how Jesus made the disciples get into a boat and go on ahead of him across the Sea of Galilee. Are you laughing yet? You'd think that by now the disciples would have learned: the boat-and-the-lake routine meant they were in for trouble. It seems that every time Jesus sent them out alone in their boat, a storm was approaching. It's almost like a practical joke that Jesus kept pulling on them, and they never seemed to get it. It reminds of Lucy's inviting Charlie Brown to kick the football, or some of the pranks I used to pull on my little brother: "Into the boat you go, boys. It will be fine – trust me! I promise. No harm will befall you!"

So there they go again: the whole future of Christendom packed into a rickety boat like sardines in a can. Of course, the storm hit them fast and furious in the middle of the lake, in the middle of the night, and all seemed to be lost. But it was there that they saw what may have been

a helping hand in the clouds. It wasn't exactly a hand, nor was it in the clouds. It was something like a ghost. What they saw was Jesus coming toward them, walking on the water. At first it seemed that Jesus intended to pass them by – one of the strangest verses in the Bible that warrants a sermon all by itself. But when they cried out to him in fear he told them not to be afraid. "Take heart, it is I," he said. Never lose courage, he might have added. Then he climbed into the boat, the storm ceased, and the danger passed.

What are we to make of such a story? If you are anything like me, you get stuck on the mechanics of the miracle. I mean, if Jesus could defy nature and walk on water, why did he bother with the pretense of putting one foot in front of the other? Why not fly? Or better yet, why not just de-materialize and then pop back into existence on the other side of the lake? So the miracle itself distracts us, and then we have trouble bothering with any deeper truth to the story. But let's try this: imagine if I or Jesper Morton could set before you an irrefutable argument that the story happened exactly as Mark has recounted it. Where would it get you? Across the East River? Into heaven, perhaps? I believe that trying to make logical sense of the miracle stories is to be asking the wrong questions about them. So ask not, Did it happen? or How did Jesus do it? Rather, ask: Where is it happening now? Where is Jesus exhibiting his power to walk on water now? Where is the helping, saving hand of God reaching toward us across the turbulent waters of our lives? Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah, today?

In today's Old Testament reading we've heard in the Book of 2nd Kings a story of the great prophets of Israel: Elijah and Elisha. Trouble was piling up most appallingly about both of them. Elijah's trouble was that he was old and frail. The whirlwind of death was approaching to carry him away. No turning his heels and running from this tornado. Retreat didn't seem to be in his nature, anyway. For years Elijah had been what seemed to be the lone voice urging the people of Israel to stay faithful to God. He had been fearless in confronting kings, and pagan sorcerers, and unruly mobs. But now his race was just about over. We can only speculate what he thought as he pondered the whirlwind stretching out of the clouds and gaining on him. Few people, no matter how close they are to the Lord, approach their death without fear, without some regrets, without worry over who will carry on for them. These were the troubles piling up on Elijah.

Elisha, on the other hand, had troubles of his own. Elisha was Elijah's apprentice, the spiritual heir of Elijah. So with Elijah's impending death, not only would Elisha have to cope with his grief, but he would also have to pick up Elijah's mantle and carry it alone. Enormous responsibilities soon would be his. The whole of Israel would be looking to him for spiritual guidance and leadership. These were the troubles piling up on Elisha. At one point he muttered, "Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?" Where was God's helping hand? Did the Lord intend to pass him by, as he did the disciples out in the boat?

God did not pass by either one of them. God did extend his helping hand – but not in the manner we would dictate, not with the happy ending we would script for ourselves. For Elijah, God's helping hand turned out to be Elisha. Elijah wanted to go off by himself and die, so he told Elisha to wait behind. But Elisha responded, "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." Two more times Elijah told Elisha to wait behind, and two more times Elisha responded, "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." That's it. It's a subtle thing. It wasn't the sound of an earthquake, or the wind, or the fire. It wasn't obviously a hand stretching from the clouds, or Jesus walking on the water. But Elisha's unshakable loyalty turned out to be the helping hand of God for Elijah. Because of it – because Elisha would not leave Elijah – both of these prophets were able to discern God's helping hand stretching from heaven.

One of the ways, if not the primary way, that God reaches out his helping hand is through people who stand with us through the worst of storms. *As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.* An amazing thing to say, given the human tendency toward self-preservation. An even more miraculous thing to hear when you are looking at a whirlwind bearing down on you. If you encounter such people – be they husband or wife or child or friend – never doubt that they have been sent from God. God intervened for Elijah through Elisha. “Take heart, it is I,” said the Spirit of the Lord through Elijah.

God reached out his helping hand to Elisha, too. God gave Elisha the many years of Elijah’s faithful example and spiritual mentorship. God reaches out his helping hand to us in that form, too – in the form of mentors or spiritual friends or parents and Godparents who over a long period of time help us mature in our relationship with God. What a blessing – to be the apprentice of a wise and godly person. “Take heart, it is I,” says the Spirit of the Lord through mentors like Elijah. That wasn’t all for Elisha. Upon Elijah’s death he received a double share of the Spirit of God to carry on the ministry that was now his. And yes, God also reaches out his helping hand to us in that way – by giving us his Spirit. God gives each one of us spiritual gifts so that we might extend his reach into a hurting world. God stretches forth his helping hand through the likes of you and me empowered by the Spirit of Christ.

In a mysterious and powerful and frightening way, a young couple from my first parish demonstrated how we become God’s miraculous helping hands to each other. In a short span of time, Tim and Hillary had met, fallen in love, set their wedding date, and looked forward to a lifetime together. They were a strikingly beautiful couple with everything going their way. Then, with little warning, a whirlwind appeared on the horizon: Hillary was discovered to have cancer of the liver and pancreas. Her prognosis was grim, and everyone prayed for God to walk across the water, stretch forth his right hand and heal this 23-year old woman.

God did reach out his helping hand, but not in the form that everyone thought God should – not in the arm-reaching-out-of-the-sky way people hoped God would have intervened. At the time of her diagnosis, Hillary’s doctors gave her six months to live. She took it all stoically, and suggested to Tim that if he excused himself from the situation and got on with his life, everyone would understand. Tim would hear nothing of the sort. He didn’t say the words of Elisha, but he lived them: *As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.* He insisted they move forward with the wedding plans without delay. This we did, and in a wonderful ceremony a few days after Christmas of that year, they married. Hillary lived for almost two years from her diagnosis, an unprecedented amount of time given her condition. And in those months the strength of their love, and especially Tim’s unshakable devotion, was like a city set on a hill for all the world to see.

One of the challenges of authentic spirituality is being able to spot the power of God at work, naming it as such, and then joining in with it. For Hillary, God’s helping hand was Tim. God sent Tim to stand with her as she passed through things temporal and finally embraced the things eternal. For Tim, God’s helping hand was a double dose of the Spirit of Christ that strengthened him to pick up the mantle that was set before him and walk on the water of that situation. Nobody saw anything stretching out of the clouds, or heard any thunder, or felt any roaring winds. But I have no doubt that the Spirit of God was at work there, the same Spirit of Christ who has been given to us so that we too might be God’s helping hands reaching out into the storms of life.

Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah? The Reverend Jesper Morton was right: *Never lose courage! When troubles pile up most appallingly about you, you will see a helping hand in the clouds.* “Take heart, it is I,” says the Spirit of Christ who comes to us.