

"On that day, when evening had come. [Jesus] said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side.' And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. 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?' He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?' And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'" (Mark 4:35-41 NRSV)

Frederick Buechner, writing on this passage, suggests that "these Gospel stories are like dreams, and like dreams they are about ourselves, and everything in them tells us about who we are the way everything in our dreams does." I have been listening to God speak to me through this story, as if through a half-remembered dream, ever since my diagnosis of cancer in May. I even put a print of Rembrandt's "*Storm on the Sea of Galilee*" on my bookshelf to serve as a constant reminder of Jesus' active presence with his disciples in the midst of that storm. I was seeking to listen, with my deepest self, for God's voice saying "Peace, be still!" as I experienced what felt like a great windstorm threatening my frail little water-swamped boat.

At times God's peace seems not only hard to grasp but even harder to hold on to. Is this only because, like the disciples in the story, I often demonstrate so little faith? I am encouraged by the scriptures themselves to believe it is more complicated than that. That's why we all find ourselves so often repeating the lines. "I believe, help thou my unbelief!"

My recent reading on Eastern Orthodoxy has been helpful. Many of the early fathers of this branch of the Church, which in the opinion of many has remained less influenced by cultural changes over the years than the Western Church, write about the human soul and its capacity to know God. They make a distinction between the *diaconia*, the faculty for discursive reasoning, and the *nous*;

"The *nous* is 'the eye of the soul' The very heart of what it means to be a person made in the image and likeness of God. It is the spiritual factor through which we directly experience God. Darkened by the fall, the *nous* must be purified through watchfulness, prayer and other spiritual practices." (*Philokalia, The Eastern Christian Spiritual Texts*, Introduction page xi)

I have come to believe my difficulty in holding on to God's peace, offered so frequently during the storms we experience, is due to a lack of watchfulness, prayer and other spiritual practices which can and do purify my darkened, atrophied *nous*! Like so many other westerners, I spend too much mind time playing the old "tapes" of fear and anxiety in the discursive reasoning part of my soul. Faith and trust grow as we experience God's love, as we learn to wait on God in the deepest part of our soul ~ that part of us that is truly formed in the image and likeness of God. I can trust if I know I am loved!

Early in the morning on the day before my first infusion of this clinical trial I woke up and began playing those "tapes". I was quickly reminded to pray instead (a gentle nudge from the indwelling Holy Spirit? (John 14:20)). I fell asleep after asking for God's peace to cover me, praying a psalm and consciously quieting my heart to listen to God. When I awoke about two hours later, I had the tune and some of the words from Horatio Spafford's hymn, "It Is Well With My Soul" running through my mind:

"When peace like a river attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll; Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say (know?), It is well, it is well with my soul."

Spafford wrote this en-route to a reunion with his wife, who had just experienced the sinking of the SS Ville du Harve and the drowning loss of their four daughters! They were also grieving the recent death of their son and a financial loss from the Chicago Fire of 1871. As a parent I can't imagine a worse "storm" than the loss of a child. Yet somehow, in the midst of these great losses, God's peace attended Spafford and he knew, in the deepest part of his soul, God's real presence loving and comforting him.

This is the peace for which we yearn and which Jesus announces to his disciples on the Sea of Galilee!

May your week be full of watchfulness and prayer and may "peace like a river" wash over you.

Under God's Mercy, Howie