

We are not in control

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Reverend Rebecca Newland
Pentecost 4B, 24 June 2012

Job 38:1-11; Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32; 2 Corinthians 6:1-13

My friends, you are not in control. I am not in control. We are tiny little creatures on a massive planet, spinning around the sun, flying through the universe — or universes. A universe that is 84% dark matter. 84% dark matter. We don't know what it is, cannot measure it and we certainly cannot control it. Our lives are bound by the forces of the planets, of the environment, of society and our upbringing. Our technological achievements give us an illusory sense of control yet our technology and knowledge often create more questions and problems. Our actions do have consequences. Everything we do and say has a result but we cannot control what those consequences will be, how they will ultimately effect others and ourselves. We are not in even in control of our feelings or of our thoughts. Just try and control your thoughts and see how you go. Try not to think of elephants. Right now banish all thoughts of elephants from your mind. I will give you a moment. How is it going?

The parish committee that is overseeing our building project must be feeling swamped and out of control. My goodness, the mumbo jumbo of planning approvals and forms. Unbelievable! A sea of chaos and confusion. The committee thinks it has one area covered and then it gets conflicting advice. It is like a many-headed monster that cannot be second-guessed.

We are not in control. We are not in control when someone we love is taken from us. We are not in control when our addictions resurface. When people treat us badly and misunderstand us. When hailstorms lurk. When drunk drivers career along the roads. When cancers decide they've had enough of remission and want to return. When people in power abuse it and create destruction for those in their power.

Recently I was doing some work at the coast. I was sitting by the windows overlooking the bay, writing a proposal paper for the diocese. A massive storm came across the Bay. I could see heavy grey clouds forming and the front moving towards me. The storm arrived within minutes and began to batter the windows. The whole house began to shake. (Not the house David is building. That one does not shake). The house was shaking so much I thought that it might topple over. I called David to tell him I loved him just in case I was decapitated by a plane of glass — seriously! Trees were felled. The seas rose and damaged the promenade at Batemans Bay and killed the newly planted grass in the park. The rising waters began to erode the foundations of the local fish and chip shop.

We are not in control. I am not in control. When the universe is 84% dark matter and I cannot stop thinking about elephants even if I want to I know I am not in control.

In the face of this reality we humans have some fall back positions. Sometimes we try and wrestle reality to the ground and put everything neatly in manageable boxes. Of course trying to control a situation, a person, place or thing often just makes it all much worse. Sometimes we simply give up and run away, often in fear and terror, grief and rage. Sometimes we blame others or institutions or religion or politicians. If they either disappeared or got their act together how much better things would be! Sometimes we sit and worry, and worry, and worry.

Just a side note on worry: stress management experts say that only two percent of our “worrying

time” is spent on things that might actually be helped by worrying. The other 98 percent of worry time looks like this: 40% on things that never happen, 35% on things that can’t be changed, 15% on things that turn out better than expected, and 8% on useless, petty worries So statistically, worrying is a COMPLETE WASTE OF TIME. So stop worrying about anything and everything!

All our readings today give us a picture of fear and worry in the face of what we cannot control. Job, after going through his trials and tribulations, where he was certainly not in control, is sitting, despondent, trying to understand it all and listening to his three friends go on and on. They try and bring order into his chaos and they offer a barrage of words, a storm of ideas if you like. The psalm gives us that picture of the sailors on the ocean. In the face of impending disaster *“their courage melts away”* and *“they reel and stagger like drunkards and are at their wits’ end”*. And then in the Gospel is the famous story of Jesus calming the storm. Context is always important in bible exegesis and the Gospel of Mark was probably written for a church community in Rome that was terrified of persecution. Nero was most likely emperor at the time. He was the one who would have Christians lined along the road on crosses, doused in oil, and set on fire to serve as lights. A terrifying prospect; an unstoppable and uncontrollable reality.

It is just perfect then the way Mark pitches this story and is completely in tune with his world. Throughout the Bible the sea was a metaphor for the place where chaos and the demonic reside. The word for “sea” in Hebrew actually comes from the name of the evil god in the Babylonian creation story. The word carried connotations of evil, a mysterious and threatening force opposed to God. This then is a very primal scene, an existential moment of sheer terror. Not only are they tossed to and fro by forces way beyond their control, it is also dark and their teacher, their leader, their Lord, is *asleep in the stern of the boat!*

Just picture the scene for a moment. They wake him. They don’t say, “Help us, help us.” They say, “Don’t you care that we are perishing?” It has all turned completely pear-shaped. They are alone in the dark, abandoned and at death’s door. They are panicking and Jesus *does not care*. Jesus then does an even more terrifying thing than the storm that rages. He commands the sea to be still. The words he uses are there same he has used to cast out evil. It is like he is healing the sea. The wind stops and there is dead calm. Not a lessening of the forces, the boat now gently moving, but dead calm. From death-dealing chaos to dead calm. No wonder the disciples are filled with great awe. Other translations have it that they are terrified.

And so, whether we feel surrounded by chaos and uncertainty or we are surrounded by the power and might of God we are still not in control.

However, we do have another choice apart from fear, worry and attempting to control the uncontrollable. We can choose faith. Faith is not belief in a propositional statement: that is, ‘I believe that Jesus is God’s son, therefore I have faith’. Faith is much more than that. Faith is trust. In fact you can believe that there is a God, that Jesus is God’s image. You can believe in all sorts of other higher powers and beings, or none at all. Yet if you do not have trust then whatever belief you have is next to useless when the chips are down and you are facing life’s storm.

Faith is that step that takes you to the still place of calm and silence. The seas can be raging, you may be fearful, anxious, feeling out of control, you may not know the answer or have the solution, the Lord might be standing before you asking you to do something that terrifies you yet you can trust. Trust.

I cannot tell you it will all be all right, that the problems will go away, that you will miraculously feel in control. What you will begin to sense is that you don’t have to be in control. You can let

go and let God. Instead of a wave of anxiety and fear there is a wave of calm, dead calm. The sea turns to silence, as the psalm puts it. It is as if when we turn to God and let go we find another primal reality, that place where we are one with God, one with the creative loving power of the universe, dark matter and all.

If we look at the Corinthians reading we can see a hint of how this trust becomes possible. Paul makes an astonishing claim that although it may look as if he and his friends have nothing, in fact they have everything. Everything. In fact he says, *“We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.”*

How on earth can Paul make this claim? He can do so because he has found that other primal reality. Just prior to this section we read Paul has been telling his readers, *“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself”*. Through his encounter with the risen Lord Paul found himself living in the reality of a God who loves and is eternally present. Through Christ, the image of the invisible God, Paul found forgiveness, healed relationships and new life.

In God we are one, one with each other and all creation, raging seas and all. In this place of trust we are free from all that causes chaos and division. And this is not some pious, nice idea. It is real and true and our inheritance as children of God. From this place we can begin to control what we stand half a chance of managing — our attitudes and our actions. With God’s power and help, we can begin to change ourselves and therefore our reality and in it all we can find that place of serenity, of calm and peace.

I’d like to leave you with a picture, a picture that may stay with you as you ponder the question of what you can and cannot control and how you can trust. One of the earliest symbols of the church was of a boat with a cross as the mast. If you look up at the ceiling you can perhaps imagine that it is the upturned hull of a boat. The place where you are sitting is called the nave, the Latin word for boat. And so as companions, brothers and sisters in Christ, we are traveling in this boat called the church. Not a particularly glamorous boat. It is not an ocean liner with ten decks of razzle-dazzle entertainment, but neither is it a convict ship with chains and torture. Lyle Miller writes: *“The church is not a luxury liner, granting passage and comfort to all who qualify and clamber aboard”* but rather *“like a rescuing lifeboat, sometimes listing, or even leaking, but always guided by the captain, Jesus, at the helm.”*

It is a simple boat then, and we travel together as we explore and grow, as we become more fully who we are meant to be. We travel together as we weather life’s storms and doubts, the chaos and fear, the uncertainty and everything, which is most things, that we cannot control. In our travels we look to Jesus, the pilot of the boat, the captain of our souls. We trust. We trust in his navigational skills, his love, his power. We model our lives on him and we let go ... of fear and worry, control and panic. Whether the storms are raging or we seem like we are going nowhere we know that *all things will be well and all manner of things will be well* as Julian of Norwich says and although we may be seen to have nothing we in fact possess everything. Irrational? Paradoxical? Yes — but beautifully and miraculously true.

Amen to that. Alleluia to God.

My life goes on in endless song above earth’s lamentations,
I hear the real, though far-off hymn that hails a new creation.

Through all the tumult and the strife I hear its music ringing,
It sounds an echo in my soul. How can I keep from singing?

While though the tempest loudly roars, I hear the truth it liveth.
And though the darkness 'round me close, songs in the night it giveth.
No storm can shake my inmost calm, while to that rock I'm clinging.
Since love is lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?