

There's a little voice inside us that wants to stand up and cheer when the disciples get fed up with Jesus, wake him up, and holler, "Doesn't it matter to you that we are going to drown?" It happens too often that when the storm arises, we look around for help, and what do we see? Jesus asleep in the boat.

Imagine this scene: Jesus has just finished teaching at the shore. The crowd was so large that day, that he spoke from a boat moored into the sea. As he finishes, the hot sun descends slowly behind the crowd, and the disciples decide to call it a day. Jesus says, "Let's go the other shore." So they wheel his boat around and carry him off to sea.

It's been a long day, so Jesus goes up top, plumps up a pillow and takes a nap. He must have been very tired; he doesn't even notice Hurricane Ida brewing off to the East. With the waves actually crashing over the boat, the disciples decide enough is enough. "Sure he's had a long day, but we seem to be going under." Maybe they just wanted him to pick up a bucket and bail water. But Jesus should do something more than nap.

To us latter-day disciples, this story provides a microcosm of prayer. After all, prayer is talking to God, and that's precisely what's going on here. Complaining to God might be more accurate. And often this is the setting of our prayer. We Christians feel we're aboard ship with Jesus, breaking through the storms of life. But when the storm becomes too intense, when it threatens our security, we turn for help and find God asleep.

At first, the story seems to challenge God for when we pray, but it also challenges us for when we don't.

The storm surrounding that little boat was small compared to the storm surrounding the life of Jesus. We're only in chapter four of Mark's Gospel, but already Jesus' enemies are increasing. And when he pointed the boat to the other shore he was taking his Jewish friends into foreign territory, Gentile territory, enemy territory. There was more than one storm at sea.

So here's a puzzle: If the storm was really violent, and if Jesus already had enemies, and if the mission he was about to begin would only confuse his disciples, it raises a very puzzling question. How did he ever fall asleep on that boat?

I think he fell asleep for the same reason that God seems to be asleep when we're in trouble. Namely, God sleeps a lot. It's not that God is indifferent; God loves us even when he sleeps.

The point here is that the whole world is a sea at storm. South Africans hate one another. Kurds search for homes. Crack houses flourish in our neighborhoods. It doesn't surprise me that God can sleep. He faces this stuff every day. It surprises me that we can sleep. It surprises me that usually the only storm that moves us to prayer is the storm that threatens us. God will do what Jesus did: God will redeem the world. But we must do what the disciples did: We must rouse a sleeping God to act for justice in the world. If God sleeps, the world will go on, but if we sleep, God save the world.