

OUTSIDE IN AND UPSIDE DOWN

Present in the storm

I recently went to a party to celebrate the birthday of a friend. It was a birthday that we would call a significant one. There were pictures of my friend, at different stage of his life, all around the room. The challenge, it turned out, was to find him in every picture – and here's the thing, he was in every picture, all we had to do was to find him. But what we all discovered was that finding him was not as easy as you would have thought. But he was there, in every picture – he was always there!

There's a guy who has become very famous because everyone is looking for him. His name is Wally. In 1986, English illustrator Mark Hanford was asked to create a character to be the focus of his illustrations of crowds. In that process Wally was born – with his distinctive red and white clothing. The idea of the pictures was simple: there's a crowd; Wally is in the crowd; all you have to do is find him. "Where's Wally?" books have become phenomenally popular. Children love them, adults and young people and golden oldies do too! People of all ages will sit for hours with a "Where's Wally?" book, looking for him. Maybe you have!

In case you are not familiar with Wally, here's what he looks like...and for a bit of fun, let's see if you can find him in this picture!

Here's how a "Where's Wally?" book works. On the first few pages of a book, Wally is relatively easy to find. But the further through the pages of the book you go, the harder he is to find. By the end of the book, he is not impossible to find, but he is very, very difficult to find. But, if you look, you will find him... because he is always there, on every page.

"Where's Wally?" reminds me of a much bigger and a much better story. I'm wondering if you've ever asked this question, maybe in different words, but in essence, the same question: "Where is God?" My best guess is that we have all, at some point in our lives, asked that question. Maybe we have asked it this way: "God...where are you?"

Probably it's been an anguished cry from the heart: "God, I don't understand, why, when I need you the most, you are nowhere to be found?" Perhaps it's been in the form of unanswered prayer: you have poured out your heart to God, and he is nowhere to be seen.

Friends, you are not alone!

Joseph, in prison in Egypt, interprets the dream of the cupbearer to the king and asks the cupbearer to remember him to the king. The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph. He forgot him, and Joseph remained in prison for two more years.

After defeating the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, Elijah runs away, afraid for his life. He cries to God: "I have been very zealous for the Lord, God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars and put your prophets to the death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too!" (1Kings 19v10)

The Psalms record many anguished cries of the heart:

Psalm 13

- ¹ How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
² How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?
How long will my enemy triumph over me?

Psalm 22

- ¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from my cries of anguish?
² My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,
by night, but I find no rest.

Job Speaks

³ After this, Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. ² He said:

- ³ “May the day of my birth perish,
and the night that said, ‘A boy is conceived!’
- ⁴ That day—may it turn to darkness;
may God above not care about it;
may no light shine on it.
- ⁵ May gloom and utter darkness claim it once more;
may a cloud settle over it;
may blackness overwhelm it.

When it’s hard to find God, you stand with many, many followers who have gone before.

My best guess is that right now, in these moments, you are sitting shoulder to shoulder with others who have experienced those times, or are in the middle of that experience today, when God is hard to find.

You stand shoulder to shoulder with those who were closest to Jesus when he walked this earth – the disciples. Actually the disciples found it very difficult to see Jesus, even when he was with them!

If we follow the story as Luke describes it, here’s how it goes: In the first couple of chapters Jesus birth is promised and then takes place. Jesus is presented in the temple as a baby, and then we skip on to Jesus baptism and his being tempted by Satan. Jesus then begins his ministry.

He claims, in the Synagogue in Nazareth, to be the one Isaiah talks about – the one who is anointed by God to teach and heal and bring freedom. That gets him thrown out of the town! Then, he teaches and casts out a demon from a man in the Synagogue. Next he heals Simon’s mother and many others. In chapter 5, as we saw a few weeks ago, he gathers some of his disciples. They must have had some idea who he was by then – having either seen for themselves, or heard of the things Jesus had done.

They are with him when he heals a man of his leprosy; they are with him when he tells a paralysed man to pick up his mat and take it home. They are with him when he invites Levi (Mathew) to join the team – Mathew the tax collector! They are with him as he teaches the people. They are with him when he is challenged time and again by the Pharisees. They are listening when he teaches that the best way to live is, in fact, to love your enemies!

They are part of the crowd when he speaks great wisdom about not judging, and building your life on something that is of eternal value. They witness the faith of a centurion and the miracle that results. They are amazed when he helped a widow whose son had died – everything that represents the unclean – and he made it clean again. They are witnesses at the party when Jesus welcomes a woman who nobody else cares about.

And then one day, after a long day's work, they get in a boat with Jesus to cross the lake. And in these moments, despite everything they have witnessed, despite everything they have come to know, despite all they have come to believe...they can't find God!

Jesus Calms the Storm

²² One day Jesus said to his disciples, "Let us go over to the other side of the lake." So they got into a boat and set out. ²³ As they sailed, he fell asleep. A squall came down on the lake, so that the boat was being swamped, and they were in great danger.

²⁴ The disciples went and woke him, saying, "Master, Master, we're going to drown!"

He got up and rebuked the wind and the raging waters; the storm subsided, and all was calm. ²⁵ "Where is your faith?" he asked his disciples.

In fear and amazement they asked one another, "Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him." (Luke 8 v 22-25)

As I read this story I find myself wondering about this question: How many times had these disciples been on the lake in a storm before? I don't know for sure, but my best guess would be, many times. And yet their reaction suggests this must have been a bad storm. So bad in fact, that they feared for their lives. These guys, who knew about storms, were very afraid! And why were they so afraid? Because, in truth, they knew and understood perfectly that they were not in control of what was happening and...they were helpless!

I'm wondering how many times have you faced a situation and felt utterly helpless? Perhaps in one area of life or another, you are feeling helpless now? There are many storms in life aren't there?

The nature of storms is that they are, mostly, unexpected. They mostly involve circumstances beyond our control; they often leave us feeling helpless. And God...well sometimes it's as if he's asleep in the boat! What makes it worse is that it was his idea that we got into this particular boat in the first place.

'One day Jesus said to his disciples, "Let us go over to the other side of the lake..." (v 22)

The truth is that following Jesus doesn't mean we don't get to face the storms of life. What I find both staggering and encouraging in equal measure, is that even after all they had experienced of Jesus up to this moment...the disciples didn't seem able to find God in the storm. What they found was Jesus asleep in the boat, and they thought he didn't know and didn't care what happened to them.

Ever been there? Are you there now?

Here, in this story, is a deep and very profound truth: God is closer than you think. The disciples can see Jesus – they can see he is asleep in the boat...but they can't find him. They can't find him because they have not fully grasped who is in the boat with them. They can't find him because they don't fully trust him to be who he says he is.

How about you?

What the disciples have not grasped is that this storm is of absolutely no threat to Jesus – that's why he sleeps! When he wakes, Jesus rebukes the wind and the waves and the storm subsides. In that extraordinary act Jesus shows his fearful disciples that, in truth, with him in the boat, they have absolutely nothing to be afraid of.

Sometimes, friends, it seems, even with everything we know and have experienced of God, we struggle desperately to find God in the storm. There are times when God appears to be asleep and he simply doesn't care that we are going to be overwhelmed and drown and the storms which can sometimes come so quickly, unexpectedly and violently, appear as a huge threat to us. And we find ourselves asking: Where is God?

"Where's Wally?" books have Wally on every page. As you go further through the book he gets harder to find because the pictures become more complex, have more in them, and Wally becomes smaller! In fact, in the 1st book he was 0.99cm squared, but by the 7th book he was between 0.2cm squared and

0.17cm squared. That makes him much harder to find. But the truth about Wally is that he is there on every page...always.

In the much bigger and much better story, God is on every page of our lives.... Always! Sometimes he's big and we are easily able to find him. Friends, when that's your experience – rejoice in the presence of God! Sometimes, God is small and very hard to find. But God is always present, on every page of our lives, and that means he is present in the storm. The truth is that God is closer than you think – even when he appears to be asleep.

When Jesus was teaching on a mountainside one day (we call it The Sermon on the Mount) he said, right in the middle of the talk: “Don't worry!” I think what he was saying is something like this:

“The kingdom of the heavens is a different kind of kingdom, and when you can see the world through the kingdom of the heavens, you see the world the way my Father sees. And when you see the world the way my Father and I see it, you will realise that you have nothing to worry about. When you see the world the way my Father and I see the world you will know that the universe is a perfectly safe place to be.

And when I appear to be asleep in the storm, when you face circumstances that you think and feel are going to overwhelm you...

...when you think I have forgotten you and that I don't care about you...

...when you think and feel that you are going to drown and the waters will sweep over you...

I want to remind you that I love you more than you will ever know...

I want to remind you that I care for you... always.

I want to remind you that, though they are real to you, the storms you face are not a threat to me...

And you are held by me and you are safe.”

The choice the disciples faced, is, I think, the same one we face. Who will we choose to trust? Will we choose to trust in our own strength and ability and understanding, or will we choose to trust in God, the king of the universe: the God who is on every page of our lives; the God who is with us in the boat; the God who fears no threat from the storm; the God who says: “Let's go to the other side... together.” The God who is closer than you think.

It Is Well With My Soul

The Story of the Hymn

Horatio Gates Spafford was born in New York, on 20th October 1828, but it was in Chicago that he became well-known for his clear Christian testimony. He, and his wife Anna were active in their church, and their home was always open to visitors. They counted the world-famous evangelist, Dwight L. Moody, among their friends. They were blest with five children, and considerable wealth. Horatio was a lawyer, and owned a great deal of property in his home city.

Not unlike Job in the Old Testament of the Bible, tragedy came in great measure to this happy home. When four years old, their son, Horatio Jnr, died suddenly of scarlet fever. Then only a year later, in October 1871, a massive fire swept through downtown Chicago, devastating the city, including many properties owned by Horatio. That day, almost 300 people lost their lives, and around 100,000 were made homeless. Despite their own substantial financial loss, the Spaffords sought to demonstrate the love of Christ, by assisting those who were grief-stricken and in great need.

Two years later, in 1873, Spafford decided his family should take a holiday in England, knowing that his friend, the evangelist D. L. Moody, would be preaching there in the autumn. Horatio was delayed because of business, so he sent his family ahead: his wife and their four remaining children, all daughters, 11 year old Anna, 9 year old Margaret Lee, 5 year old Elizabeth, and 2 year old Tanetta.

Another Tragedy

On 22nd November 1873, while crossing the Atlantic on the steamship, Ville du Havre, their vessel was struck by an iron sailing ship. Two hundred and twenty six people lost their lives, as the Ville du Havre sank within only twelve minutes.

All four of Horatio Spafford's daughters perished, but remarkably Anna Spafford survived the tragedy. Those rescued, including Anna, who was found unconscious, floating on a plank of wood, subsequently arrived in Cardiff, South Wales. Upon arrival there, Anna immediately sent a telegram to her husband, which included the words "Saved alone...."

Receiving Anna's message, he set off at once to be reunited with his wife. One particular day, during the voyage, the captain summoned him to the bridge of

the vessel. Pointing to his charts, he explained that they were then passing over the very spot where the Ville du Havre had sunk, and where his daughters had died. It is said that Spafford returned to his cabin and wrote the hymn "It is well with my soul" there and then, the first line of which is, "When peace like a river, attendeth my way.." Horatio's faith in God never faltered. He later wrote to Anna's half-sister, "On Thursday last, we passed over the spot where she went down, in mid-ocean, the waters three miles deep. But I do not think of our dear ones there. They are safe..... dear lambs".

So who would you most want to have in the boat during the storm? For me the God who is present in the storm – the God who is closer than you think! For me the God who means I can say: "It is well with my soul."

Preached in Crawley Baptist Church, on Sunday 25th February 2018, by Rev. Ian Phillips

When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.

Refrain:

It is well with my soul,
It is well, it is well with my soul.

Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,
Let this blest assurance control,
That Christ hath regarded my helpless estate,
And hath shed His own blood for my soul.

My sin—oh, the bliss of this glorious thought!—
My sin, not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more,
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

For me, be it Christ, be it Christ hence to live:
If Jordan above me shall roll,
No pang shall be mine, for in death as in life
Thou wilt whisper Thy peace to my soul.

But, Lord, 'tis for Thee, for Thy coming we wait,
The sky, not the grave, is our goal;
Oh, trump of the angel! Oh, voice of the Lord!
Blessed hope, blessed rest of my soul!

And Lord, haste the day when the faith shall be sight,
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll;
The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend,
Even so, it is well with my soul.