



Rev. Chris Taylor - 6-2-19
"Clouds and Thick Darkness"
Psalm 97

Years ago I had the privilege of spending two weeks on retreat with one of my heroes in the faith, Dallas Willard. Dallas was Chair of USC's Philosophy Department at the time, but more importantly (as I've shared in the past) author of a book that profoundly impacted my own walk and ministry, *"The Divine Conspiracy."*

The retreat was for a small group of pastors, and we met at a monastery in California. We delved deeply into the role of the spiritual disciplines and spent a lot of time in prayer and contemplation. One of the things that struck me then, and that has stayed with me ever since, was a phrase that Dallas kept repeating, "All will be well. All will be well." It wasn't just a concept for him. It was a belief that penetrated every part of his being and as a result he exuded a great sense of peace. He knew that he abided in God's hands, and so was certain that no matter what might come his way, ultimately all would be well.

It is that same sense of confidence that the psalmist is getting at here in our text. The psalm is a beautiful one that lifts before us the reign and power of a just and righteous God. "Let the earth rejoice," he says, "because the Lord is king." God is in control. That's his message, because he is in control nothing can stand against him: fire consumes his adversaries; lightning lights up the world; mountains melt like wax before him. This is a God, in other words, who exists high above all that is; the one, true God who is exalted above all other gods.

The question for us, this morning, is whether we really believe that, and if we do, what does it actually mean? When I attended that retreat with Dallas Willard I had just been through the horror of Columbine a short time before. I knew what he was getting at when he said "All will be well." I just wasn't sure I could buy into it.

Think, for example, about the shootings this past Friday down in Virginia Beach. Twelve dead. How can we say "all will be well" when we know that just a

couple of days ago twelve families had breakfast with a loved one, said goodbye fully expecting to see them later that same day, but by that evening found out their wife or husband, son or daughter, sister or brother or parent or friend had just been ripped away by some senseless act of violence? How can we say “Our God reigns” when violence and horror continue to be so much a part of the world in which we live?

Back in 1979, sailing’s Fastnet Race was held for the 28th time. It is a race that dates back all the way to 1925. The course is 605 miles long, and begins and ends in England. It gets its name from the Fastnet lighthouse off the coast of Ireland. Sailors have to go around that lighthouse before turning back for England.

Three hundred and three yachts began the race in mid-August, but on the third day a terrible storm struck. For about twenty-four hours it generated winds as high as 70 mph, and breaking waves some forty to fifty feet high.

Of the 303 boats that started only 85 finished. Seventy five boats were flipped upside down. Twenty four were abandoned, and five were sunk. Four thousand people were involved in the rescue efforts, but in spite of that massive outpouring fifteen sailors were lost.

I was particularly struck by one of the accounts that came out of that disaster. Jane Potts was part of the crew on Ted Turner’s boat, Tenacious. Turner, who was 40 at the time, had just won the America’s Cup two years before. He was one of the greatest sailors of his era. What I remember is Potts describing her effort at one point to get some sleep in the bow of the boat. The bow was slamming with tremendous force into those towering waves. She wondered how anything could take that kind of punishment; wondered if the bow might cave in or the boat be overwhelmed and sink.

But here’s the thing: Potts knew that Turner was without question one of the very best skippers in the world. She trusted him completely. She knew she couldn’t be in better hands and was certain that no matter how bad the storm might get, Turner would bring them through. And knowing that, believing that, she was able to relax and get some rest.

Turner, as it turned out, not only brought Tenacious and its crew through the storm. They actually won.

When I read this psalm I think about Jane Potts in the bow of Turner's boat. I think of that sense of peace she knew because she trusted so completely in her captain. That's what the psalmist is talking about. That's what Dallas Willard was getting at. God is in control, and we can trust him, and trust his hand upon the tiller of our lives.

God's presence doesn't mean that storms won't come our way. Of course they will. They're a part of life in this world.

Up until the creation of the Panama Canal, if you wanted to get from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific and the paradise of those tropical islands, you had to go around one of the Capes at the bottom of each continent: either Cape Horn at the bottom of South America, or the Cape of Good Hope at the bottom of Africa. Those capes were and are two of the most dangerous places in the world, but there was no avoiding them if you wanted to get to the oceans beyond.

What that means is that if you were on your way to the Pacific and rounding one of those capes, then it wasn't the captain's fault if you encountered terrible conditions. The skipper was doing exactly what he or she was supposed to do – getting you to your destination on the other side. But while the conditions weren't the skipper's fault, your odds of safely navigating those conditions were vastly improved by having a great captain.

So yes, storms happen. Today we live in a world in which acts of terrorism and mass shootings are becoming commonplace. We live in a world in which cancer wreaks its havoc; a world of tornadoes and cat 5 hurricanes; a world in which innocents are born with crippling disabilities, and where evil continues to stalk our lives in all its many guises. The storms are real, and as we saw this past Friday, the storms can break your heart.

But the promise of this text, the promise that Dallas Willard knew with every fiber of his being, is that we don't have to face those storms alone. God is right here. And we don't have to move through them dependent on our own limited resources alone. God offers us a strength and power and guidance that are so much greater than our own – God is doing in us and through us what we could never hope to do on our own.

The invitation, then, is to place our trust in God and so to open our lives to that great peace which passes all understanding. Trust God's hand upon the tiller and know that whatever storms might come, God is there guiding us through this great and wonderful adventure to that glorious destination that awaits us all. All will be well. All will be well in this life and for all eternity.