

Insanity amid madness

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This week's texts tell the story of deliverance from our many troubles. They deliver us from the oppression of self-consciousness. They deliver us from that sinking feeling, that sense that the boat is going down and that we are beyond the reach of peace. Jesus all but scoffs at fear and faithlessness: "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?"

God deliver us from sin, from self-consciousness, from restlessness. If we hear these texts right, we rearrange our position in the universe. We are not our own strength; God is our stronghold. In times of trouble we are to trust. In the psalm, strength follows trust. The boat doesn't sink.

When I heard that my dearest friend's 94-year-old mother was breathing her last, I rushed to the hospital. There I found a fully intubated woman who was moving her head back and forth in nervous distress. The doctor offered her a pad of paper, on which she weakly scrawled, "Water."

"Anita, do you want something to drink?" he asked her. (We think that hearing is the last function to go.) "Are you thirsty?" Instead of a pathetic but certain yes, we got an angry shake of the head: *no*.

I returned the paper to her, and she wrote, with even greater effort, "Water the plants."

Anita was not ready to die. She was still caring about something outside herself. And here we were having the turn-off-the-intubator conversation! How wrong we would have been. My point isn't that each of us should water the plants, but that we should receive the water. Jesus told us to have faith in him. Our boats are not sinking.

We are often an island of insanity in a sea of madness. (Phrase stolen from Thomas Friedman regarding a hotel in Beirut.) We are neither perfect nor complete. We are one little finger on the great body of Christ. The world and its problems are

enormous, but God is even bigger. And God's power to free us from our part in the mess is prodigious. It is nice that we want to water the plants even while dying, but we would be better off caring about something larger. Better we learn the source of our strength: our trust in God.

One of the first international climate catastrophes happened in Borneo in the late 1990s. A haze came and did not leave. When the pollution levels were off the charts, beyond dangerous, the government stopped even counting them. Instead, it delivered this line, over and over: "We can't be responsible for an act of God." The government issued surgical masks, which offered absolutely no protection against the haze but made people think they were doing *something*. One scholar concluded that the masks, like tribal religious masks, created a phony faith in a phony kind of god: the political authority that whitewashed the situation. The government ended up asking that people pray for rain, as Allah's wrath was the cause. In fact, the haze was caused by government deforestation, which continues.

To God we are large and small, significant and not so significant. We are not nothing to God; we just are not as big as we think we are. When we get ourselves in right relationship to the universe, we are delivered and the storms in us will quiet.