Interesting texts in our Gospel lesson today because they deal with the spiritual reality that is the most prominent in our present society, and maybe it’s always been that way, I don’t know. But the issue raised today is this encounter with God in stress, and in the case of all of our lessons today high stress. What’s interesting about it of course is that in each of these situations God seems to show up in ways that really stress us out. In the famous serenity prayer used in AA it is acknowledged at every meeting that hardship is a pathway to peace. And something like this is being offered up in our lessons today.

This should engage us I think at least a little in our high stress world. Because everywhere we turn we are offered ways to relieve stress, it’s just a constant preaching from many different sources. Exercise, meditation, prayer, walks on the beach, vacation, alcohol, designing your living room. It all promises to relieve stress. I even have a stress relief program on my fitbit watch. Learn how to breath.

And there is this theme of course about not being stressed out that we find in biblical faith. Do not worry about anything, we read in Philippeans Chapter 4. Come unto me, all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest. Peace that passes understanding. And there is no doubt that learning how to not get caught up in the news, or the gossip, or the “sky is falling doomsday” reports that the socialists or the fascists are going to take over is a huge part of what we would say is adulthood. Growing up. Relax, chill out, this a huge spiritual skill that comes with maturity.

But once again, this cannot become the whole message. It’s not the whole picture. There is a flip side to life and to what we find in scripture about stress. It happens and no amount of “don’t panic” will work. You just can’t get it out of your head laying in bed at night. This is the presence of God that is found in stress, not the God who takes stress away. Life is stressful and no amount of peace of mind religion can save you from it at times. Peace of mind religion can, without careful thought, can become a kind of escapism. A way to just avoid the reality of life and what is happening. Sometimes the threat requires attention. So we’re getting into drought maybe. There’s a lot of people who need water. And you can use religion to sort of escape from the reality that a lot of people are experiencing. Oh, don’t worry be happy. Trust God. It will all work out, always does. Well, instead of just blowing it off, maybe we need to think about how we use water? Sometimes getting stressed out is the only way to deal with it. Hey, we have a problem here. And todays texts I think about they way that we find God in stress, rather than the God who is found in the lack thereof. Hope I’m saying that well.

All of our Gospel lessons today deal with this balancing act about stress. Our Gospel lesson is just great, because Jesus responds to the disciples pleading for stress relief. It’s a huge storm and it looks like they’re sinking, and they’re super stressed out and are begging Jesus to make it go away. Bring us peace! And so Jesus does. Boom. And on the surface it looks like a simple Peace of mind message. Jesus will calm the storms of life. Just ask him.

But notice what happens after Jesus calms the storm. Now there is dead calm. No wind at all. There they are out in the middle of the lake. Just sitting there. Now what? How are we going to get to shore? And furthermore what Jesus does leaves them asking a pretty interesting question. Who is this? You go from one extreme to the other. Either way, there is stress involved that you have to live, and can’t escape. Not enough wind is just as stressful as too much wind. The farmers all know this well. Sometimes it’s God make it rain, we’re getting stressed here. And sometimes it’s God make it stop raining, we’re getting stressed here. And then certain questions that have no easy answer bring a stress of their own don’t they? Who is this guy?

This is another point made in our lessons today. Because if we’re under stress and looking for a simple peace of mind, we’re also often looking for simple answers. We want the answer. And so everywhere we look, along with stress relief, we are offered the answers. I know what this is. I’m the pastor and so I’m supposed to have the answer. To questions people have about God, to know how to double attendance. Solve the riddle of life. How many “ask the pastor” blogs are out there, and the pastor become the answer man. It’s crazy. When our car won’t work or we have a fever in order to find peace of mind we want the answer. And there as a lot of people out there who are ready to offer their nice simple answer to the problems of society. We need harsher punishments. We need more compassion. More discipline. More women and minorities in leadership roles. And increasing this is the way I think people are often seeking stress relief in our culture. I have the answer. Like there is one answer that if we just found it would solve everything. I listen scientists to say that one day we’ll have pretty much all the answers. If we would all accept Christ our problems would be solved.

Well I think the Apostle Paul had discovered the power of God in Jesus Christ. He penned the peace that passes all understanding. But often whatever peace he found was wrapped in stress. In fact his resume’ so to speak that confirms his faith is pretty stressful in our 2nd lesson today. Afflictions, hardships calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger. But somehow in that is purity knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love. His faith didn’t solve all his problems it seemed in this sense to give him many more. His faith brought him into the stress instead of out of it. God did not give him some kind of peace of mind religion some way to not ever be stressed out. God didn’t give him a little bubble to live in that was separated from the reality of life.

And regarding answers, look at our first lesson from the book of Job. Job is the story of a man who had everything and lost it all. Here’s the story: Satan comes along and challenges God about Job. Oh yeah God, Job believes in you because he’s successful. He’s so blessed, look at my family and my farm all that I have. Thank you God. Yeah, no wonder he believes. Take that away and we will see how much he really believes. So God agrees to let Satan do his thing. And in calamity after calamity Job loses everything, all his kids die, farm gone, cattle gone, boils all over his body. The only thing that Satan doesn’t take away from Job is his nagging wife. The authors of these books were brilliant. I mean it can’t get any worse than that.

And here is the issue we’re trying to deal with today. For three chapters Job does the Peace of mind thing. The answer thing. The Lord gives the Lord takes away, it’s all good. No stress. I lost everything, I just trust God, no problem. Job tries that. He pulls it off for a while. And I think we probably all have. And we’ve probably found that kind of peace once in a while. It does happen. And I also think that the church often presents this as the way we ought to deal with stress. This sort of heroic sense of faith. Oh, just give it to God no problem. No worries here. Patience of Job. And if we’re stressed out then, it’s from a lack of faith.

But as you read the book you discover that this approach eventually doesn’t work. And finally Job breaks and for about 40 chapters he shares his stress with God. His friends are all super religious with their easy Peace of mind answers. But Job isn’t buying it anymore. He shares his stress with anyone who will listen. He shares his questions with anyone who will listen. And God listens and and listens and todays text is God’s response to Jobs stress. In most bibles it’s entitled, “God answers Job”. Finally. So this is a big deal. God is finally going to reply to why Job has had to endure such stress and lack of peace in his life. And it is not because he lacked faith.

Well, it’s a surprising answer isn’t it? Because it’s not an answer at all. No where in God’s reply is there anything like Peace of Mind or answers. Look at it, there isn’t an answer to be found in God’s most famous reply to the question of why. God’s reply is simply more questions. Questions that Job is going to have to learn how to live. Live and share. And after this, it’s in not our text, but immediately following it, do you know what God says next? He says that Jobs questioning and sharing his stress, rather than living in some bubble of peace of mind has been odedience. Not finding some stress free zone. But learning to share the stress and questions that he has. And this is a vital lesson for health and faith. You can’t always live peace of mind and easy answer religion. The way of living with God is not some awesome peace of mind that I have all the time. That just isn’t the way it goes. Sometimes the way you find what you need from God and from one another is to share the stress and share the questions. And my guess is that we would all find a much more real kind of community and better connections with each other when that could happen too.

Today we have a baptism. A real human being is baptized into the reality of learning to grow up into God’s presence. The reality of Grace and unconditional love. Today it’s important to acknowledge that this will not always be a stress free life, a life of constant inner peace. There are times where we find that, or God gives it to us. Learning to relieve stress is important. But I think the times of the deepest love and connection and healing will be when we can learn to share it. Finding God in real life. Amen