Some months ago I was driving down South Claiborne on my way to work at Loyola and the traffic was getting more and more backed up as I neared Canal St. By the time I crossed Canal it was obvious that the construction going on was going to keep from getting to work on time. So as soon as I could I turned across Claiborne thinking I could get over to St. Charles and continue on my way. However, somehow when I got over there around the back of the hospitals and other buildings, I made a wrong turn and wound up wandering around in the somewhat vacant but not yet cleared area where the new LSU hospital is arising. Round and round I went, recognizing street names but not knowing exactly which way to turn to get myself out of the mess I had gotten myself into by being impatient. Finally I saw a bunch of cars whizzing by and an entrance to what street I didn’t know until I was already headed to Metairie on the Earhart Expressway with no way to get off the thing for quite some distance. It was frustrating and a little frightening not to know where I was, but I dared not ask God to help me when it was my impatience and foolishness that got me into the mess in the first place.

When I first started this series I’ve called “Ain’t Necessarily So,” Ann Yarborough suggested I preach on that old adage “God helps those who help themselves” which people assume is in the Bible, but it “just ain’t dere.” That’s not to say that God isn’t with us when we are helping ourselves, but why is it necessary to call on God for help when “she” has already given us the intelligence and skills needed to do the job ourselves? Is this not what God was saying to humans at the beginning of time when “she” told us “she” had given us everything good under the sun and that we were to dominate or manage what had been given us?

It’s amazing to me what passes for Bible knowledge and interpretation. On the one hand there are those who claim absolute orthodoxy in their reading
of Scripture and yet who manage to live by only those precepts that in no way interfere with their freedom of choice. And then there are those whose interpretations are so loosely based on Scripture that they assume everyone else just doesn’t know what they are talking about. We often pray for travelling mercies and then drive like bats out of hell assuming that “God our co-pilot” will keep us and everybody else safe from our very unsafe driving habits, in which perhaps God is keeping us from allegedly helping ourselves.

Well, there’s a lot involved in interpreting what the Bible says and what it actually means. It’s a venture not unlike my getting lost in familiar territory. Like my Uncle John who believed there is only one “correct” interpretation of any Scripture, many of us expect our professors, pastors, Sunday school teachers and others to simply tell us what a particular Scripture means. But it’s just not that simple. We have to travel into Scriptures, make some wrong turns here and there, maybe even get a ticket for speeding, before we can come to any sort of interpretation that is what God wants us to get from the Scriptures.

And it’s those wrong turns that may eventually lead us onto and into what is the way toward understanding God’s way for us. You see, the Christian’s journey always leads us to intersections where we must decide which way to go. On one corner to the right is the BigMart of Cheap Solutions; across the street is Billy Bob’s Building Supply where those who can’t and shouldn’t go for the supplies to build their pipe dreams; on the corner to the left is the First National Bank of Bailouts and Buyouts who knows far better than you what you should be doing with your money which they somehow think is theirs because it’s stored in their house; and on the adjacent corner is the First Church of Christian Comfort, a mega church housing everything from scantily clad dancing troupes to committee meetings of the unable appointed by the unwilling to do the unnecessary!

So there you are and the light has turned green and you must make a decision which way to go, so you turn right alongside the BigMart of Cheap Solutions, feeling certain that down that street you will find the perfect Biblical answer to all your doubts and tribulations, a spiritual guru
who will tell you exactly what to think because he has a “Doctor of Theology” in Biblical translation and knows exactly what the Bible says. But alas, he has answers to all the questions you haven’t even asked. And worse yet, you discover that this turn to the right is down a street that is a cul-de-sac where the only way out is the way in. If God helps those who help themselves when it comes to translating the Bible, then God helps us all, because it is so much easier to leave that to someone else rather than to rely upon the brain God gave us and the Spirit God sent us to ride into the Bible and out again without getting lost in the process.

But once we have made the loop in the cul-de-sac of translation by guru, we must come back to the intersection of Arrogant Avenue and the Boulevard of False Pretenses to try again. If we turn left this time alongside Billy Bob’s Building Supply, maybe we can build ourselves a bridge over the troubled waters of self-reliance, but alas, we would rather just rent a boat to cross that river rather than build a bridge between what the Bible really says and what we would like for it to say. And isn’t it always the case that we would rather let God bails us out rather than actually get all sweaty building our way over the troubled waters? So maybe that left turn isn’t all we had hoped it would be. Maybe we’ll just return to the intersection and try another way out of the world as it is.

So, down the street alongside the First National Bank of Bailouts and Buyouts we go. Maybe if we just pay our money, God will bail us out of our wrong choices and fix the mess we’re in. Isn’t that a bit arrogant, isn’t that exactly what the Bible warns against. Must God always be our backup plan just in case we can’t fix things ourselves? Do we not yet understand that God has already given us the skills to clean up our own messes? Why must we assume that the eternal God is even interested in our messy lives? Must we spend so much time praying for God’s help when the solutions to our “everyday” sins are right in front of our eyes? Must we trust our talents and skills into the care of those who would profit from our mistakes, rather than simply ask for God’s forgiveness, pick ourselves up, dust off our shoes and try again?

So, once again we turn around and head back to the intersection of self-reliance and self-denial and there stands the First Church of Christian
Comfort with its massive glass and chrome façade, its big old parking lot, its gymnasium, its tennis courts, its neon marquee flashing snippits of truisms and not-so-truisms, announcing multiple activities that have little or nothing to do with bringing “good news” to the poor who cannot afford to even get there; to the sick and dying left to suffer their pain and anguish without so much as a visit from the comfortable Christians who are too busy filling their lives with self-improvement activities to be bothered with the miseries of their fellow humans; to the neglected, abused, and abandoned who would never enter the doors of a place more absorbed in itself than in the Christ it supposedly proclaims.

Only when we have travelled down every street off the intersection of false hopes and broken dreams can we finally ask for the help that God is so willing to give, the help that we cannot come by on our own, the kind we can neither buy nor build, the kind that “she” and only “she” can give, which is to save us from ourselves.

And is this not what this morning’s gospel reading is telling us for the umpteenth time? The storms are raging around us, we’re about to be dashed against the rocks, we are about to go under, and for all the world it looks as if Jesus is unconcerned, sleeping peacefully. When they awakened him, they said to him, “Don’t you care that we are perishing?” So he got up and said to the stormy sea, “Peace. Be still!” and then there was a dead calm. But notice what he asked them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”

And that’s what God is still asking us. It is still what the Bible is saying after all these millennia. We have no need for God’s help when we can help ourselves, nor does God have any desire to help us when we are fully capable of helping ourselves, but God stands ready with infinite love and mercy to helps us when we cannot help ourselves, to rescue us from the storms of life, most especially from the storms of our sin and our refusal to respond to fear with faith. Whatever storms are raging in your life that would keep you from being who God wants you to be and from doing what God wants you to do, God stands ready with “her” message, “Peace. Be still.” AMEN.