

I Kings 19: 9-16
Romans 10: 5-15
Matthew 14: 22-33

Storms and Wind
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“Dear God, be good to me; the sea is so wide, and my boat is so small.” It is said (and I never know exactly how to verify this) that this is an ancient Breton fisherman’s prayer. It was made famous by President Kennedy, who was given a plaque for his desk with those words on it. A longer poem was written by the theologian and historian Winfred Ernest Garrison that elaborates on the theme:

Thy sea, O God, so great,
My boat so small.
It cannot be that any happy fate
Will me befall
Save as Thy goodness opens paths for me
Through the consuming vastness of the sea.

A boat has long been a favorite symbol for the church. Some churches have stained-glass windows depicting a wooden boat with a sail. The image is contained in the logos of both the Upper Valley Haven and the World Council of Churches. Traditionally, it signifies the church as a vessel of salvation, much as the ark saved the family of Noah from the Flood. And, if you like to think about word origins, you may notice that we still call the central portion of the sanctuary a *nave*, and that the Latin word for ship is *navis*, and for boat, *navicula*, meaning “little ship.” My boat is so small, in other words. And, whenever I go to England, I notice that many of the old village churches have wooden beams visible holding up the ceiling...which look an awful lot like the upside down hull of...a boat. Clearly, the fact that several of the first disciples were fishermen, and the fact that Jesus preached near the inland Sea of Galilee, has a lot to do with this image. There is even a story where Jesus preaches **from** a boat in chapter 13 of Matthew.

So that’s all very nice: boats as churches, churches as boats. But that not our scriptural problem today. It’s the storms. It’s the wind. It’s the walking on water. That’s where the tension is, that’s we get a little anxious.

We need to remember that the people of Jesus’ time would have had a complicated relationship with this sea or lake. It was the source of livelihood for many. It was also a highway of sorts, cutting off a long journey on foot around the edge. But it was also dangerous. Sudden storms were (and are) common. In ancient Jewish culture and literature, the sea and anything to do with it was a place of absolute fear and terror. If you read the middle section of Psalm 107, you can almost feel the seasickness and despair of the sailors as they lurch from the tops of the waves to the trough, “at their wits’ end” as it says. Don’t worry, after heartfelt prayer, those Psalmic sailors make it safely home. Nevertheless, the sea is a place where they were not in control and the elements were untamed and unpredictable and monsters lurked beneath the surface.

In some ways, this storm on a lake reflects the storminess of whole situation of Jesus and the disciples in this Gospel. There were threats of arrest or assassination. The needy crowds often seemed out of control. Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, had just been executed. Jesus and the disciples were exhausted by their ministry. Jesus needed a bit of alone time, prayer time to continue, so he sends the disciples ahead. Of course he did. But the storms keep coming. The turmoil is not over.

The disciples in the boat probably only had a few miles to travel, but everything was against them. The text said that their boat was battered or even "tortured" by the waves. They were not close to the shore, and the wind was blowing hard in the wrong direction. Oh, and it was dark, about 4 in the morning. Already exhausted by the work of ministry and by grief, they were susceptible to fear and delusions as well. And it is fear that takes the upper hand – the sighting of Jesus terrifies them. Not only the physical world, but the supernatural world is a place of terror.

By the way, this moment- Jesus walking on the water - is often depicted in art, but it seems a little off to me. First of all, it was night, so how much would they see at all, until he was right next to them? Then, if the waves were so strong and high, it would be more like climbing than walking: no serene, white-robed gliding figure, but someone striding over an obstacle course.

Jesus' words then say so much: "Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid." In some ways, this was a simple offering of assurance and comfort. But especially that central statement: "it is I" points to more. It might be translated as "I am' is here." The first followers of Jesus were steeped in the Old Testament stories. "I am" is a title for God, given to Moses in his revelation at the burning bush. When Jesus uses it, he is pointing to a deeper reality than just a statement about himself. "I am" is even here, even in the middle of the night, even in the middle of a storm, even in the middle of your grief, even in the middle of your exhaustion.

And Peter responds right away. I love the way that Peter is so often the narrative tool by which we see ourselves – our good selves and our weak selves – in the situation. He says, "If it is you, command me to come do you." In other words, prove it with some more magic. So out steps wonderful, impetuous Peter, takes a few steps, then like a road runner cartoon character who races off a cliff and keeps on running mid-air until he looks down, he sinks like a stone, (just as we might do when we get scared) until the hand of Jesus reaches out and sees him safely into the boat. Once again, I think Peter has missed the point here. There was really no point in getting out of the boat and into the storm. He is eager, he is impetuous, and he is clueless. But he is like us: we'd like some actual proof that God's hand can hold us up. Peter gets that proof, along with a lecture on trust. Maybe Jesus' "Why did you doubt?" was not addressed at the fear that made Peter sink, but the impulse that made him ask for pointless proof. When all of them are reunited in the boat, the wind dies down, and the disciples' terror becomes worship and adoration.

The big interpretative question that shows up in many sermons is: do you stay in the boat (or the church) because Jesus put you there and sent you across the lake? Or do you show your great faith and courage by getting out of the boat (or church) like Peter...only we can do better and not get distracted as he did by noticing the wind? What do we do in the storms and winds that come our way?

Because they do seem to come our way, almost daily. In the 2nd century, the epistle of Clement to James says: *"For the whole business of the Church is like unto a great ship, bearing through a violent storm people who are of many places, and who desire to inhabit the city of the good kingdom. Let, therefore, God be your shipmaster; and let the pilot be likened to Christ. . . . Let*

those sailing expect every tribulation, as traveling over a great and troubled sea, the world.” So, number one, expect storms. That’s the way life, and the world, are. We, like Jesus and the disciples, live in a world that is constantly tossed by raging storms of chaos and violence and hatred. The horrific bloodshed and destruction taking place in the Middle East has become almost routine news. There has been wave after wave of the same thing in that part of the world for decades. With one retaliation after another, the whole thing keeps escalating rather than defusing. Then, we are getting alarmed about threats from another part of the globe, North Korea. Then, white supremacists march in Charlottesville, screaming hate and inciting violence. They surround black churches, where people of many colors have gathered in prayer, with torches in hand – a battered church in a racist storm. The stormy sea is so great, and our boat is so small. What are we to do in this storm?

Then there are the “little” conflicts that seem to tear apart our lives and families and friendship networks. And sometimes our churches become stormy places. Then there are the storm of personal ill health or grief. Our boat is battered by the waves.

Here’s one bit of Good News in the gospel story: both the one who got out of the boat and the ones who stayed in were saved from disaster. The boat functions in many ways: as a place of testing (where the disciples feel threatened) and a place of safety in the storm (where disciples are protected by Jesus). Then the boat serves as an environment for building faith (where disciples are challenged to trust in Jesus), a spiritual battle ground (where God meets and defeats the cosmic storm), and a place to experience the saving power of Jesus. The story reminds us that while the presence of Jesus is necessary, it is not always comfortable.

So, some of us will venture out of the boat, in faith or with hubris, stirred by a vision to go into dangerous places. Some of us will stay in the boat, in faith or in fear, waiting for some clarity about this vision, this phantasm that is so puzzling. Perhaps some of us are so exhausted with rowing against the current that we just have to stay put and catch our breath. The good news is, there is room for all of us in the boat, and we are promised a dawn with better weather. We are promised a dawn of silence in which God may speak.

Winfred Ernest Garrison’s poem continues from that first verse I read....

Thy winds, O God, so strong,
So slight my sail.
How could I curb and bit them on the long and salty trail,
Unless Thy love were mightier than the wrath
Of all the tempests that beset my path?

Thy world, O God, so fierce,
And I so frail.
Yet, though its arrows threaten oft to pierce my fragile mail,
Cities of refuge rise where dangers cease,
Sweet silences abound, and all is peace.

May we learn to work and pray for cities of refuge for all people, of every color, of every faith, of every nation. May we hear the sound of sheer silence when the Lord passes by, and know our calling.
Amen.