

“Through the Storm”
A Sermon for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
N. Farnham & St. John’s Episcopal Churches – The Rev. Torrence Harman
Matthew 14:22-33

“Search for the Lord and his strength” (Psalm 105:4)

“Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified; saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the board, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him. “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshipped him saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.” (*Matthew 14:22-33*)

The sky darkened. All of a sudden it seemed. The wind freshened then gathered strength. Somewhere sails stirred, straining to catch it. Water, calm only moments earlier, began to stir, as if something down below was waking up, agitated by the rising wind calling to its watery depths. Waves broke against the side of the wooden boat, battering it, rocking it back and forth. What had seemed so sturdy earlier, seems fragile now, tossed about on the surface of the sea. The air thickened, mist hung heavy, oppressive as the barometer fell. So did night, as it fell around them in the middle of the sea.

Those in the boat on the agitated sea grab onto the sides of the boat. They hurriedly reach for whatever is not already stowed to make sure nothing is swept overboard. They speak in low then louder tones, their voices muffled in the rising wind. They reach out to steady each other. Grab whoever is nearest to them. They should be used to storms on this sea they thought they knew so well. But they have come to know, from experience, that each storm has its own way about it – a life of its own, and that a storm can have a disregard for any life that tries to navigate through it.

And then an apparition, ghost like comes near. Those in the boat fall silent. The shape of it is familiar, looks like Jesus. Is it coming to them or simply going on ahead, to the other side? Will it pass them by? It is ghost like, other worldly. They cry out in fear. It comes closer. Then speaks. “Do not be afraid!”

The sea of Galilee can be rough. It can turn on you in a moment’s notice. I remember being on it with a group from the seminary about five or six years ago, huddled together in a modern day

replica of the first century fishing boats that were home to the early disciples who spent so much time on the Sea of Galilee. The idea was to get a sense of what it was like for them. Little did we know when we started out that we would get close to the real thing.

It was calm that afternoon when we took off, not under sail, but motor power. We wore jeans, t-shirts, sweatshirts, not robes. There were no nets lying around or stowed away in the boat, but we had stowed away in some canvas bags some other things: a loaf of bread, a bottle of wine, a linen cloth, a cup, a plate. The idea: to have communion. Interesting: that during our three-week pilgrimage, we would not share communion in any place that replicated an upper room. It would be at other times, other places, but this one we would all probably remember the most. Because as we gathered for Holy Communion in the center of the boat in the center of the Sea of Galilee as someone intoned old familiar words, the sky darkened, the wind rose, waves whipped up by the wind slapped against the side of our boat. Our guide seemed startled. I had a sense he wanted us to speed up our little ritual.

As our boat began to rock up and down in the wind, I remember watching the bottle of wine and cup that we had placed on a small wooden platform start to slide. Someone dashed forward, reached out and grabbed the bottle before it could crash to the deck and spill the wine. Someone else the cup, another the plate and the bread. The rest of our communion was hurried, bread broken, wine poured, all taken into our bodies as we shared that time and spoke of body and blood given for us, of bread of heaven and a cup of salvation. The guide started the motor and was turning the boat toward the distant horizon of the shoreline as we finished. I remember our being quiet as we headed back then spilled out on the shore weaving a bit as we got our “land legs” back.

There would be other unsettling times during our pilgrimage in Israel and Turkey. Strong winds were whipping up, unsettling the landscape. Some riots breaking out, the Pope hurriedly but hopefully planting a little olive tree in the Garden of Gethsemane a few days before we left Jerusalem. Clashes between Jews and Palestinians. The Muslim world stirred up. Upon our return home we would begin to hear the term ISIS – as clouds darkened and the sea which is the Middle East began to seethe and foam with violence which would ultimately reach the shores of all the nations of the world.

Our times are rough now. The storms seem to rise at will, their own will. The barometer of our lives rises and falls with an irregularity that keeps us uncertain as to what is coming next. This past week, a hurricane blew through. Heavy winds, rain that sounded like a train was moving through. Bay and river waves acting like the ocean, breaking furiously over shorelines, tearing at anything human made (docks, boats) unlucky enough to be in their path. And where the wind touched the earth in its tornado type fashion, old trees uprooted, other's snapped off or sheered, sliced down their middle. Lightning striking, indiscriminately. The wind moves where it wants, the storm has its own path. Branches not securely fastened to the trunks of the trees they relied upon blown down. Actually, anything either human or nature made, not firmly rooted, grounded or fastened down vulnerable to the storm.

This week's storm passed. It did its damage in only a few hours on Tuesday morning. That afternoon, the clouds parted, the sun came out, the air was clear. Isn't it amazing how clear the air is after a storm – with a rain-washed clarity about it? But, debris everywhere. Folks coming out from under the storm. Pouring out of the shelter of their homes. Walking about to check out the damage in their yards and in their neighborhoods. Chainsaws buzzing away where trees had fallen blocking a roadway or taking away a part of someone's roof. Emergency vehicles showing up, also crews dispatched to repair electric lines, to get power to homes and businesses again. Even the national guard showing up in some spots. Relief or distress showing up on people's faces depending on whether they had been impacted by the storm or not. Everything over? Of course not. It is our season for hurricanes and storms where we are. They are part of our landscape. And then winter will come, and more storms will come and go, then with ice and wind and power lines and trees and our homes and lives are vulnerable to it all – this weather in our lives – still.

Our Gospel passage today about disciples in a storm mirrors the other well-known storm passage in the Gospel of Matthew four chapters earlier. The disciples there are also in a boat on the Sea of Galilee in the midst of a terrible storm – one threatening their very lives. In that story Jesus is in the boat with them. Jesus is sleeping in the boat. They have to wake him up as they cry out, thinking they are not going to survive the storm. Does Jesus even care that they might perish? Jesus rises from where he is resting, calls out to the storm and the winds. They subside, they obey his call to be calmed. It is a powerful story when we consider that the storm Jesus has the power to calm is the terrifying storm that is raging not just in the disciples "external world" but in their internal world where fear, uncertainty, anxiety, distress pulse through them, threatening to overwhelm them.

In our stormy story today, Jesus is not with the disciples. He has sent them on ahead of him. The disciples are alone in their boat when the storm hits. Even when he appears, ghost like, other worldly, they do not recognize him. They are still terrified.

"Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." How many times in life do we need to know Christ is present with us – the Divine that stills the storms, brings order out of the chaos of our lives, assures us we will be okay. This is yet another storm in life story to help us come to understand and experience the power of Christ's saving presence in our lives. And yet this story also offers the consolation of "doubt" being such a constant companion on our journey towards faith and trust. Not doubting Thomas this time but doubting Peter.

Jesus says, "come" to us as disciples – "even if I call you and you try to do something impossible that, for you, is like trying to walk on water." And yet, like Peter, we quake in the strong wind. We look down at our feet, feel the waves break upon our knees, wonder how deep we might sink if we falter, wonder what scary things lurk within, wonder if we will be overwhelmed, sink below the surface, unable to breathe, drown in it all, even if the wind does not blow us away first.

My favorite part of the story? Where Jesus, seeing Peter falter begin to sink, “immediately reached out his hand and caught him.”

The Psalmist offers: “Search for the Lord and his strength.” It is time to scan our horizon, even as storms darken our world. Search, quest within the heart: from where is help coming? I wonder where in our lives and the life of the world right now while storms are whirling around all of life, we can begin to see the Divine walking towards us, speaking to us in do not fear words and ways. How the Divine is reaching out to us. Immediately, in the present chaotic times that are either coming and going in our lives or staying around for a time that seems to be going on way too long. Where is Christ reaching out to catch hold of us, raise us up? We just have to see him right here, right now, in the midst of it all and let ourselves get caught up in his saving, redeeming compassion for us.

Somewhere inside of us, in our hearts, there is the secret knowing, that seeds faith. A knowing that we are loved beyond belief. That there is a Way forward. That with Divine help we can begin to see our way through and beyond this stormy time and any of the storms of life, held up by Divine Love. Faith in the possibility of this great love for us will get us through. Because we are loved beyond belief.

By God's amazing grace, may it be so

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