

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost (b)
Job 38:1-11 2 Corinthians 6:1-13 Mark 4:35-41
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
June 20, 2021 (Traditional)

We all go through those horrible storms: Someone we love dies. Illness. Struggling marriages. Job loss. In the middle of these storms...have you ever wondered whether God is asleep? Like we see Jesus sleeping on the cushion in the back of the boat in today's gospel lesson, while the storm is raging around them. The disciples are crying out: "Lord, don't you care that we are perishing here?"

The gospel text doesn't really give us answers as to *why* the storms pass through our lives. It doesn't tell us why evil happens. But the good news is clear: God is with us in that boat. He is personally going *through* the storm with us. He's experiencing your life with you. That's the miracle of the incarnation. God has become flesh. Jesus is now in this boat with us.

Now it's true, he seems to be on a different nap schedule than his disciples. He's taking a Sunday afternoon nap while they're fighting for their lives. So there's this disjointedness between God's time and human time. But...Jesus **does** wake up and jump fully into the situation, doesn't he? And you notice, *it's not the storm that wakes him up*. It's the disciples yelling. He's keyed into the disciples, not the storm. He wants to give them what they need. He's not worried about the storm. He knows he's safe in his Father's arms, even though that storm...make no mistake...could drown him as easily as it could drown the disciples. Jesus is flesh and blood, after all. But he's not worried about himself at all. What he's concerned about is these people in the boat with him. He hates to see them in this state of terror. And he's disturbed, you notice, not by the violence of the storm, but by their lack of faith in him. Just as he knows he's safe in his Father's arms, they should know they're safe in *his* arms, no matter what happens.

There's a challenge in this gospel: do we go to Jesus because we're hoping he can get us out of the storms of life? Or do we put our trust in him in the *middle* of the storm, knowing that he is here for us, no matter the outcome? Sometimes we look at religion as a way of getting out of the storms. As if, if we are truly faithful, we won't get sick, we won't lose our jobs, bad things won't happen to us. Well, faith in Jesus doesn't get us out of those storms. We'll still go through them. So can we put our trust in Jesus, even if it means drowning with him? Another way of putting it: do we love Jesus for what he might do for us in this world? Or do we love...Jesus?

I was a spoiled kid growing up; we had an indoor swimming pool in our house. One positive thing I learned from it was how to distinguish between the friends who loved me and the ones who loved what I could do for them. Jesus also knows the difference. But here's the beautiful thing about Jesus: he's still there in the storm with us, no matter what's going on in our hearts. He just wants us to turn to him.

Remember: the disciples are going to go through worse things with Jesus than this storm. It's all about WHO is WITH YOU in the boat right now. Our final victory over all the storms of life depends on having Jesus in the boat with us right now, here today. Whether we live, or whether we die today is nothing. It's all about having Jesus, belonging to Jesus...dead or alive.

The storms we go through are scary. Lives can be destroyed. The storms can drain the hope out of us. The storms are where we find out what we're holding on to. If we're clinging to other human beings, the storms will show us all the weaknesses there. No human being, no matter how dependable or loving, can ever fill in for God. If we're clinging to our own power and control and capabilities in life, the storms will break us. If we're trying to handle everything alone in life, the storms will drive us deeper into isolation. But Jesus has come. He's in the boat with us. Now we can let go of our false hopes, our false expectations, our false gods, and turn to him. He is the only source of life and newness.

Another angle on this lesson—one you don't hear as often—is how this lesson speaks to us as the gathered people of God, the church. Why were the disciples in the boat in the first place? Because Jesus told them he wants to go to the other side. Seems almost too obvious to point out, but think about it: this whole drama with the storm happens because they're following what Jesus told them to do. So, if they had just stayed at home, there would be no storm, no narrow escape from death, to contend with. But Jesus says, "I want you to come across the lake with me today."

So what's on the other side of the lake, that Jesus wants to go there so badly? Gentiles. Non-Jews. People who do not know the God of Israel. That's very significant. They get into the boat with Jesus to go to this foreign territory, where God is not known. And the storm rises against them, trying to push them back. Whenever you follow Jesus, and represent him, and try to bring the good news of salvation and new life into the world out there, the world is not going to welcome you with open arms. Jesus meets with opposition wherever he goes. The world thinks that it's fine already. It doesn't agree that it needs to be saved. Mortally ill people don't want to hear what the doctor says. So in this gospel lesson, we see the same pattern that's been happening throughout the story of Jesus' life. He wants to go connect new people with God: the powers of evil and chaos rise up against him, try to hold him back.

So whenever we as the church get in the boat together and follow Jesus, we can count on it...the storms will come. The world is not going to sit back passively and let us share the gospel. The enemy will throw every wrench he can into the works to keep us from getting into the boat together and going across the lake towards those new people, towards the next generation, who need to have the Word of God—Jesus Christ—in their lives.

And here is the biggest temptation: keep the boat tied firmly to the dock. That's what a lot of congregations are doing right now, because the storms out there in the world are violent right now; people are highly resistant to the church's message. So the temptation

for God's church is to keep the boat firmly anchored at the home port. In other words, we're just going to stay safe with the crowd we know. But off the top of my head, I can only think of two kinds of boat that stay anchored at port: museum boats like the Queen Mary, and floating casinos. We all know congregations that have become or are becoming museums. It's more about memories than ministry. And a lot of congregations have become spiritual casinos, too. A casino is where you go to 1) be entertained, and 2) maybe gain something spiritual for *yourself*. That's it. There's nothing bigger than those two things—entertainment and self-fulfillment—holding you together with the other people who happen to come onboard for the show. Obviously that's not New Testament Christianity.

The Church of Jesus Christ was always meant to be a ship on a journey to unknown lands. To embark on that ship, to go on that adventure with Jesus and his people—it's always going to bring us out into deep water and stormy weather. We can try to keep our religion individualized and personal. But that is not faith. Jesus is saying, "Let's go across to the other side, together. Let's go see who those people are on the other side of the lake." Let's welcome them aboard.

In our baptism, we've been rebuilt to withstand storms. We go out expecting them. We say "bring on the storm." You know how at the end of a thunderstorm, everything can get so incredibly quiet and peaceful. All the trees and the buildings stand there in high relief. Everything's at rest after the storm. Jesus brings that kind of spiritual peace into our lives before the storms even begin. With Jesus, we have access to that final peace and rest and fullness, even before the winds are howling.

At the end of today's gospel, what are the disciples afraid of? They're not afraid of the storm anymore. That fear is nothing compared to the newfound fear and awe they have towards Jesus. "Who is this," they ask, "that even the wind and the sea obey him?" Let's put our fear where it belongs. Let's not fear the temporary storms of this world. Let's fear and give all our respect and reverence and worship to the one who has all power over the storm. The one who put death in its place...who calmed the final storm. The one who, out of his incredible love, has chosen to carry you and me with him across the lake.