

The I of the Storm

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

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1 Kings 19:9-18 NRSV

Then the word of the Lord came to [Elijah], saying, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” He answered, “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.”

He said, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.” Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

Then there came a voice to him that said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” He answered, “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.” Then the Lord said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.”

Matthew 14:22-36

When he heard about his cousin John’s death, Jesus went off to the wilderness, hoping to be alone. But large crowds followed him there, and he turned his attention to them. He healed the sick among them. And toward evening, he prepared a meal for them, for thousands of them, using five small loaves of bread and two fish. Then this . . .

Right away [Jesus] made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of him to the other side, while he sent the crowds away. After he had sent the crowds away, he went up into the hills by himself to pray. He was there alone when evening came. By then the boat was being battered by waves because of a contrary wind and was a considerable distance from shore.

But very early in the morning, he came toward them, walking upon the lake. When the disciples saw him walking upon the lake, they were terrified and said, “It’s a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. But right away Jesus spoke to them. He said, “Take heart. I am here. Don’t be afraid.” Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you upon the

water.” He said, “Come.” And after getting out of the boat, Peter began to walk upon the water toward Jesus. But when he saw the strong wind, he was afraid. He began to sink, and he cried out, “Lord, save me!” Right away Jesus stretched out his hand to take hold of him. And he said to him, “You with such little faith, why did you doubt?”

When they got into the boat, the wind stopped. And the ones in the boat worshiped him. They said, “You truly are the Son of God.”

After crossing over, they landed at Gennesaret. When the men of that place recognized him, they sent [word] into the whole region and they brought to him everyone who was sick. They begged him to let them just touch his tassels, and everyone who touched them was made completely well.

Children’s Story

I used to be afraid of thunder-storms. So when I was about your age, my mom told me a story about angels bowling. That’s what all the noise was about, she said. But that didn’t help. I was still afraid.

One summer when I was older, we had a thunderstorm every Friday night. I started to hate Fridays. Until I learned not to be afraid of thunder-storms any more.

Here’s what happened. Whenever we heard a thunderstorm coming, my friends and I would sing a song that made fun of the thunder and lightning. We did that every Friday. And before the summer was over, I wasn’t afraid of thunderstorms anymore.

I’m still not afraid of thunder-storms. That’s a good thing, too. Especially living in Ohio with the big storms we have here.

One thing I didn’t know back then was that I could pray to God during a thunderstorm, that I could pray and ask God to keep me and my family safe – and our neighbors and friends.

You already know that, don’t you? You know that when a storm is coming or when it’s right overhead, you can call out to God for help, call out to God to keep you safe. That’s a good thing to know.

Sermon

It’s a familiar story. Some of us remember it from Sunday school. Or we think we do, yet parts of the story are anything but familiar to us. Read the story patiently, and you’ll see what I mean. The story I have in mind is the one from the end of Matthew 14. And the centerpiece of that story is Jesus walking on the waters of the lake.

Now, whether you believe it really happened or not, you probably picture it a certain way. If you’re like me, you picture Jesus walking in plain view, putting one foot in front of the other, his clothing clean and dry, his hair flowing this way and that, as he moves across calm waters. But he was not in plain view. It was very early in the morning, so visibility was limited. And the lake was anything but calm. Waves had been battering the disciples’ boat all night. And they hadn’t let up.

Somehow, in a way that I can't picture, Jesus dealt with the rise and the fall and the crash of those waves. He must have been soaked to the skin, his wet hair stuck to his face, as he struggled toward the boat. He was a terrifying sight, now in view, now hidden, as crests and troughs had the boat and Jesus himself bobbing this way and that. To the disciples, he was a strange apparition, ghost-like. Not an answer to the storm, he appeared to be an unbidden danger rising from the storm to terrorize them.

When he recognized their fear, Jesus shouted to them across the noise of the storm, shouted just a few words, enough to calm them, enough to reassure them. "Take heart. I am here. Don't be afraid" (v. 27). After which, Peter – it's always Peter, isn't it? – Peter had to say something: "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you upon the water" (v. 28). To which Jesus simply answered, "Come" (v. 29).

What in the world is Peter doing? Sure, he steps over the side of the boat and starts walking toward Jesus, walking somehow on the stirred-up water. And yes, he has that moment of crisis, when he sees just how bad the storm is and he starts to sink. And, of course, Jesus reaches out, grabs hold of Peter, and gets him back to the boat. But what was Peter up to, to begin with?

Jesus chides him: "You with such little faith, why did you doubt?" (v. 31). But what, exactly, was Peter doubting? Was he doubting whether he could stay above the waves and make it to Jesus? Was it that he was losing confidence, and that's why he began to sink? I don't think so.

Did you notice what Peter said to Jesus? "Lord, if it is you . . ." In the midst of the noise of the storm, those words came as an echo, an echo from another conversation, a testy conversation in the wilderness, when the devil said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread" (Matthew 4:3) and "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down" (Matthew 4:6). And the words will echo once again on Golgotha, when passersby will say, "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross" (Matthew 27:40).

It's not that Peter was unsure about the wind and the waves, or even about himself. He was unsure about Jesus. Notice the contrast with the other disciples. Peter had "little faith." Peter had his doubt. But the others? They worshiped Jesus and said, "You really are the Son of God" (v. 33). Not "If you are the Son of God . . ." but "You really are the Son of God." Matthew recounts a similar contrast after the resurrection. He tells us that "when [the eleven disciples] saw [the resurrected Jesus], they worshiped him; but some doubted" (Matthew 28:17).

So this story of the boat and the storm and the walking on water, this story is about Jesus, about recognizing Jesus and who he is. In particular, the story is about recognizing Jesus when you have been storm-tossed this way and that for hours that have seemed like days, recognizing Jesus in the dim light of morning, recognizing Jesus when he isn't where he should be and is where he shouldn't be, recognizing Jesus and counting on him when his presence scares you as much as his absence, scares you nearly to death.

There are certain places you don't want to be in a storm. For example, you don't want to be in a small fishing boat out on a large but shallow lake, where the waters are easily stirred into fury. You also don't want to be on a golf course, with every follow-through turning your extended arms into a lightning rod.

Sometimes, though, we can't get away from storms. At times like that, what matters is who we're with. When I was a young boy and afraid of thunderstorms, what I wanted more than anything was to have my mom next to me. Her presence made all the difference. That's how it is in the middle of a storm.

And we have our share of storms, too. Sometimes, as in Peter's case, it's the slowly rising storm of doubt. At first, there's just a hint of trouble on the horizon. Maybe it's when we first realize that Sunday school versions of Bible stories have been misleading. Then when we read straight from the Bible, we find stories that are hard to believe or too disturbing to believe, stories that don't understand how the world works or stories that paint a picture of God that we don't recognize, that we don't want to recognize. Little by little our faith is chipped away by the hammer and chisel of doubt. And sometimes doubt drives all over our faith like a bulldozer, leaving it crushed.

We have our share of storms. Sometimes it's the low-pressure system of disappointment. Lexus has a new set of commercials about all the opportunities we let pass us by and how we'd better not lose the opportunity to buy a new Lexus. I don't know how many of us will run out to buy a new car, but we know something about lost opportunities and about disappointments.

When we're young, we dream about what we want to be. But there are so many challenges to getting there these days. College is crazy expensive, and most of us don't qualify for big scholarships. The job market is terrible, with the indentured servitude of internships and temporary employment, all without benefits, the best choice available. And dreams of marriage and family flounder on changing demographics, with young people waiting longer and longer to marry or not marrying at all.

When we're older, we know the disappointment of looking back, comparing what we've become with what we had hoped to be. We've morphed into mid-level drudges, when once we were academic superstars. We've spent years in mindless routine, going through the motions to get by, when once we fully intended to live our lives with purpose, to make a difference in the world. And now we're beginning to wonder what people will say about us when we die and whether our life story will justify our accumulated carbon footprint.

Disappointment is a hovering low-pressure system. It breeds a constant storm of inactivity and despair. The unrelieved gray and the steady drizzle soak our already leaden souls and sink us deeper.

We have our share of storms. Sometimes it's the pop-up storm of crisis. A lost job and suddenly our home is in jeopardy. A cancer diagnosis and suddenly we have a year to live, if

you can call it living. Or someone touches us and uses us in ways that are just plain wrong, and we start to fall to pieces.

We have our share of storms. We do. Storms that we would avoid if we could. Storms that have come out of nowhere. And sometimes storms that, like fools, we steered our way into. It's not where we want to be, in the storm, tossed this way and that. We want calm. We want peace. We want the wind to stop blowing, the waves to settle, the rain to stop falling. More than anything, what we want is for the sun to come out, to dry our clothes, to dry our tears, to lighten our darkness.

Back to Matthew's Gospel. He writes, "When [Jesus and Peter] got into the boat, the wind stopped" (v. 32). The wind stopped. I wonder about that. There are other storm stories in the gospels. In those stories, including one in Matthew 8, we're told that Jesus rebuked the storm, that he told the wind and the waves to settle down. This time around, though, Jesus doesn't say anything. Here the wind just stops. Matthew goes on to tell us about people who were healed without a word from Jesus. All they had to do was get close enough to Jesus to touch his tassels, and they were made whole. Is that how it is in the midst of the storm: have Jesus close by, in the boat, and without him saying a word, the wind stops?

I wonder about that. I wonder if the wind just seems to stop. Could it be that the storm is still raging all around, but that the presence of Jesus transforms the experience? You know about the "eye of the storm," the still, quiet center of a hurricane. The storm continues to rage on all sides, but in the center of it all, there is calm and quiet. Is that how it seemed to the disciples, is that what they experienced, even though the storm was still raging – is that what they experienced, now that Jesus was with them?

That's what we want. We want Jesus to call out to, when the wind and the waves are threatening to sink us, Jesus to call out to even in the midst of our doubt about who he is and what he can do. We want Jesus to say, "I'm here. Don't be afraid. I am here." We want Jesus to reach out to us, take hold of us, and lift us out of the waves.

What we want more than anything is for Jesus to get into the little boat with us, the boat that's tossing and turning this way and that, the boat that could sink at any moment. We want Jesus to be our calm, our peace, our quiet center, the one in whose presence – which admittedly can be hard to discern and can even be frightening – the one in whose presence everything is okay.

We don't need him to give all his attention to us. We just need him to be near. Near enough for us to reach out toward him, to touch just his tassels and be healed, and be blessed, and be saved, and find peace and rest, to find in him the "I" of the storm.

Faith looks for Jesus through the storm, calls out to Jesus from the storm, and counts on Jesus to be near us in the storm. That much at least.