

Secure in the Storm

Second Sunday in Lent

March 16, 2003

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passages

Psalm 107:28-32 (NRSV)

- ²⁸Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,
and he brought them out from their distress;
²⁹he made the storm be still,
and the waves of the sea were hushed.
³⁰Then they were glad because they had quiet,
and he brought them to their desired haven.
³¹Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to humankind.
³²Let them extol him in the congregation of the people,
and praise him in the assembly of the elders.

Luke 8:22-25 (NRSV)

²²One day he [Jesus] got into a boat with his disciples, and he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side of the lake.” So they put out, ²³and while they were sailing he fell asleep. A windstorm swept down on the lake, and the boat was filling with water, and they were in danger. ²⁴They went to him and woke him up, shouting, “Master, Master, we are perishing!” And he woke up and rebuked the wind and the raging waves; they ceased, and there was a calm. ²⁵He said to them, “Where is your faith?” They were afraid and amazed, and said to one another, “Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?”

A Sudden Storm

Luke tells us a simple yet profound story that begins a new section of his gospel. Luke’s story is basically an abridged version of the story as told by Mark (Mk 4:35-41). Jesus has taken some of his disciples on a voyage across the Sea of Galilee, headed for the Gentile lands on the eastern shore. The voyage will take awhile, so, not surprisingly, Jesus decides to nap and soon falls asleep. Sudden and violent storms are common on the Sea of Galilee and such a storm quickly engulfs the small craft. The disciples see the boat filling with water and they frantically rush to awaken Jesus, fearing that they may die in the storm. Jesus wakes up, rebukes the storm, and calm returns to the sea. Jesus is disturbed by his disciples’ fear, asking them “Where is your faith?” He knows that fear, not doubt, is the opposite of faith.¹ The disciples were afraid of the storm, but now they are even more afraid!² After all, they had just witnessed a power greater than the storm. What did they just witness? “Who then is this?” Who is this man that even storms obey?

¹ Fred Craddock makes this point in his commentary on Luke.

² Note that Luke uses the phrase “amazed and afraid” only after Jesus calms the storm. The disciples recognize that such power is the prerogative of God (see Psalms 65:7, 77:16, 89:9, 104:7, 107:23-29; Job 26:12; Jeremiah 5:22). This is from C. Evans’ commentary on Luke in the *Word Biblical Commentary*, 2002.

The Sea of Galilee

The “lake” referred to by Luke is the Sea of Galilee, a harp-shaped body of water about 8 miles across at its widest part. The sea sits astride the great rift valley extending from Egypt upward into Syria. Consequently, the sea is 700 feet below sea level. It is surrounded by high hills reaching about 1500 ft. The combination of the high hills and low sea causes abrupt temperature shifts and sudden, violent storms, such as the one that threatened to swamp Jesus and his disciples.

Jesus was raised in Galilee, a hilly region on the western side of the Sea of Galilee. Most of Jesus’ public ministry was spent in this area. The Sea of Galilee played an important role in Jesus’ life and ministry. Jesus found his first disciples from among men who fished the sea’s waters. Further, Jews lived on the western side of the sea, while Gentiles lived on the eastern side. In today’s passage, Jesus is crossing the lake to minister among the Gentiles. Jesus’ work among Gentiles was always a potent demonstration that the kingdom of God was available to all.

The Bible can be a little(!) confusing when it comes to names. The Sea of Galilee was also referred to as the Lake of Gennesaret (Luke 5:1), the Sea of Chinnerath (Num 34:11), and the Sea of Tiberias (John 6:1). Lands and places would pick up assorted names as they passed through various hands. Maps in the back of your Bible can help, but even there most maps won’t tell you all the names used through the course of biblical history.

Luke has shortened the story told by Mark and driven it quickly to these two questions: “Where is your faith?” and “Who then is this?” We’ll take a look at each.

Where is your faith?

Fear and amazement at Jesus’ actions wasn’t new to the disciples. Once, Jesus had gone out with them to fish in the Sea of Galilee (Luke 5:1-11) after they had spent a disappointing night on the lake. Jesus instructed them to lower their nets – and the nets were filled to the point of breaking. There were so many fish that the boat threatened to sink under the weight. The disciples were “amazed,” but Jesus told them “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” Peter must have had some inkling of what was going on, for after the miracle he fell at Jesus’ knees saying, “Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man.” It is God who cannot abide the presence of sin.

One of the most common questions in my classes is, “Why do the disciples have so much trouble seeing who Jesus is? . . . why don’t they “get it?” There is no fully satisfying answer. Fred Craddock rightly notes that “They had been with Jesus long enough to have adequate ground for trust in God and in Jesus’ access to God’s power.” Yet, they lost confidence and panicked. They were overcome by anxiety because in their own minds and hearts, they were following someone who they still saw as no more than a wise, and very human, teacher. So, it shouldn’t surprise us that the disciples seemed to be more frightened by Jesus’ command of the sea than they were by the storm itself. After all, who could really do such a thing? Even though ancient people ascribed command of the elements to kings and wise men, in all the ancient Roman, Greek, and Jewish traditions there is no mention of someone who actually did it. But Jesus did. The disciples saw it for themselves.

Who then is this?

The Jews were desert people, not seafarers. As R. Alan Culpepper notes, in the Old Testament the sea was a place of danger. He writes, “Thus, declarations of God’s power over the sea, which often recalled

the Exodus, were acclamations of God’s power to preserve and protect. . . By stilling the wind and the waves by his word of command, therefore, Jesus does what in the OT God alone could do. The story is an epiphany, a manifestation of Jesus’ divine power and identity.”

In Psalm 107, the psalmist praises God for deliverance from stormy seas, confident that God’s people could always rest secure in God’s arms. This doesn’t mean that bad things won’t happen to us. Paul was once shipwrecked in a storm, ending up on a deserted beach (Acts 27:9-44)! Nonetheless, Paul stayed confident that God’s purposes would not be thwarted, that nothing could separate him, or us, from “the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord,” and that “all things work together for good for those who love God” (see Romans 28-39).

We are in the Lenten season, a time of preparation for Easter. This year, Lent is a time of especially high anxiety for most of us. War looms. The economy struggles. Stress levels are high. For many of us, the storms of life seem especially intense right now. The disciples’ failure to understand Jesus’ identity caused them much needless fear. But we do understand. In a few weeks we will proclaim the glories of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection. We place our faith and trust in Jesus, know that in so doing, we find rest and comfort and peace in God’s own arms. In Jesus Christ, we find “the peace of God which surpasses all understanding” (Philippians 4:7). Hallelujah!

Messiah and God

Today’s passage revolves around the question of Jesus’ identity. The disciples’ faith fails them because they do not understand who Jesus really is. As Luke’s gospel presses forward, Jesus confronts the disciples more and more directly. When Jesus asks Peter, “Who do you say that I am?,” Peter replies, “The Messiah of God.” (Luke 9:20) But even here, Peter doesn’t go far enough. The question of whether Jesus is the Messiah is separate from the question of Jesus’ divinity! This is a point of much confusion among Christians. To first-century Jews, Messiah and God were not synonyms. When Peter says that Jesus is the Messiah, he is not claiming that Jesus is God. Rather, Peter is claiming that Jesus is God’s agent, the one through whom God would inaugurate his kingdom. Only much later would Jesus’ followers come to understand that Jesus is not only fully and truly human, but also fully and truly God.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Psalm 107 God delivers his people!</p>	<p>Day 2 Mark 4:35-41 Mark's telling of the story</p>
<p>Day 3 Matthew 8:23-27 Matthew's telling of the story; How do the versions differ? Why?</p>	<p>Day 4 Acts 27:9-44 Paul's storm at sea and shipwreck</p>
<p>Day 5 Jonah 1:1-16 God throws a storm at Jonah to block his flight from God.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Spring Bible Academy Session begins in 8 days -- the week of March 24!

We'll be offering a variety of daytime and evening classes. Four different courses will be offered. On Monday evenings, Scott Engle will teach *Introducing the New Testament*. On Monday mornings and Tuesday evenings, Scott will teach *Our Life in the Spirit*. Both of these classes are lecture-oriented and are suitable for those who know little about the Bible. Rev. Doug Meyer, Rev. Kathryn MaGee, and Monty Moore are going to teach a class on Thursday mornings based on Brennan Manning's book, *Ruthless Trust*. Also on Thursday mornings, Frankey Commer is going to lead a class on the Gospel of Mark. We hope you'll join us for one of our spring classes! For more info and to register on-line go to www.standrewccl.org. **Please register early!**

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In the Bible, the sea is often a symbol of primordial chaos, a challenge to God's sovereignty. In Genesis 1, God's spirit moves upon the waters, bringing order and life out of chaos. In Revelation 21, the new heavens and new earth arrive and "the sea was no more." That is, chaos is banished from creation. Sometimes it seems as if we live in a world dominated by chaos and disorder, in which we are swept along toward destinations we never envisioned. God's way is not the way of chaos. How do we find our way through the chaos and disorder of life? How do we find peace amidst all the storms that life brings to us? What is the role of the church in our struggle to find peace and direction in our lives? How can we help each other?
2. This story revolves around Jesus' identity. Why does Jesus' identity matter . . . to them or to us? Sometimes, Christians are tempted to say that only Jesus' teachings really matter. Certainly, Jesus shows us the way to live in right relationship with God and one another, but can we separate the teacher from the teachings? Christians proclaim that Jesus is fully and completely human and fully and completely divine. We don't try to explain how this could be; only that it is so. What difference does this proclamation make in our struggle to live as Christians day to day? What difference would this proclamation have made to the disciples in the boat that day? What difference would it make in your life if Jesus had been a wise teacher, but not God himself?