

The Perfect Storm

Time after Pentecost, Lectionary 12
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Job 38:1-11; 2 Corinthians 6:1-13; Mark 4:35-41

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

It was quite a storm that developed over the Sea of Galilee. Mark describes the wind rising, the waves beating, the water pouring over into the boat, threatening to sink it. The disciples are frightened, and consider themselves truly alone in the middle of that sea, with the one person they look to for guidance asleep in the stern. And only after that one person is awakened, and orders the storm to cease, does he turn to those frightened followers and speak. This is what he says: *Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?*

When I was a child, I know I had my share of nightmares, a fear of the dark with the accompanying desire to hide under the bedcovers, and occasional bouts of insomnia. I wasn't an anxious child, but some nights sleep did not come easily. Many's the time I went to my mother in the wee hours, waking her up to tell her about a bad dream, about my worries, about my inability to fall asleep. While she meant well, her response, usually based upon her own sleepy stupor, was to say, "Think pleasant thoughts." So I'd go back to bed, vainly imagining pleasant things: butterflies, amusement parks, candy, our pet cat, whatever. Occasionally it helped.

But her pat answer never really dealt with the things that troubled me, the things that went bump in the night, whatever it was that created enough stress to prevent me from sleeping well. "Think pleasant thoughts" was tantamount to saying, "There's nothing to be afraid of" when, frankly, I went back to bed feeling there was indeed stuff for me to fear.

Should Jesus have awakened in the stern of that boat, rocking and rolling on the sea, and said to the disciples, "Think pleasant thoughts" and then gone back to sleep, Mark's gospel story would leave us with quite a different feeling. Should Jesus have said, "There's nothing to be afraid of," the disciples might have completely turned from following him—or maybe even unceremoniously dumped him overboard.

The truth is, there were things of which to be afraid. Violent storms were known to erupt on the Sea of Galilee, and fishermen, as several of the disciples were, would have been quite familiar with those weather concerns. You'd think then, since several were fishermen, their familiarity with such storms would render them **less** fearful. But considering the storms erupted out of the blue on otherwise calm days, taking even the most seasoned fishermen by surprise, I guess you could say the opposite was true. These disciples were more fearful, because they knew how dangerous the storms were for small fishing boats. They knew you couldn't guess when the next storm would hit, and your small boat might be far from shore when it happened. Oh, they had something to be afraid of, all right.

I wish bad dreams were the only things of which you and I had to be afraid. We have perfect storms in our lives as well. They erupt as suddenly as those raging winds whipping through the valley passes of the hills surrounding the Sea of Galilee. They take us by surprise with their ferocity, their chaotic nature. One minute we're healthy, the next minute we're told by the doctor a test came back abnormal and follow-up is needed. One minute we're gainfully employed, the next minute our job has been eliminated and we're sent packing. One minute we're coasting along smoothly, the next minute our refrigerator goes on the blink or our car needs a new transmission. Our circumstances can change in the blink of an eye: Relationships end. People die. Things fall apart. Mistakes breed destructive consequences. Lives are disrupted. And we may feel exactly like those disciples, our little boat swamped, far from shore, threatening to capsize. We may feel **exactly** like those disciples—terribly alone.

Jesus is awakened by the disciples. They accuse him of simply not caring about them and whether they would perish. He rebukes the wind and waves, bringing the storm to an end, then says, *Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?* What Jesus does **not** say is, "There's nothing to be afraid of." There is a distinction between the two here. Jesus knows full well there is chaos, there is storm, there are forces that threaten us from within and without. Pastor Gary Charles wrote that Jesus doesn't fault the disciples for being afraid of the storm—it is, in fact, a terrible storm. But he speaks in strong terms to them, as Charles puts it, "for thinking the demonic forces of the sea are more powerful than he."

If we read the ending of Mark's Gospel, when the women go to the tomb to prepare Jesus' body for proper burial, an angel tells them, "Do not be afraid." Because Jesus wasn't dead any longer. Because Jesus was raised to life. That's why the angel said, "Do not be afraid." It wasn't that death wasn't scary, or crucifixion wasn't gory, or grief wasn't overwhelming, or the Roman Empire's power wasn't terrifying in its abuse of power. These were things to be afraid of. It's just that Jesus' power was ultimately greater than any of that. *Who then is this, that even the wind and sea obey him?* wonder those somewhat clueless disciples. Who then is this, that evil cannot overcome? Who then is this, that death cannot seal in? Who then is this, that even our weaknesses and failures cannot stop from welcoming us with open arms?

I think it is very interesting that the verses just prior to this story of the stilling of the storm are those two simple parables we talked about last week. The parable of the seed growing secretly while the farmer slept; the parable of the mustard seed growing into a tremendous shrub before you know it. Both parables begin with words like this: *The kingdom of God can be compared to....that harvest that grows without our doing anything about it, that great shrub that blooms out of a tiny seed.*

Then we have today's story. Why, look! It's that same kingdom of God making its sudden and impressive appearance—in **Jesus**—as he rebukes wind and wave. And next Sunday the kingdom of God will make its appearance again—in **Jesus**—as he heals a hemorrhaging woman and brings a little girl back from the brink of death. See, the king of this kingdom will keep making his appearance. Even down to today, in our word and meal and gathering here. Some people will have faith, and others will not. Some will trust, and others will turn to their own way. Meanwhile, Jesus will continue to show in his words and deeds that no force can match his

might, that nothing will separate us from his love, and that even in the midst of our perfect storm he will never, never abandon us.

I read the most interesting story in the latest issue of *Time* magazine. There is a man named Yukio Shige, who spends his days atop the Tojinbo cliffs along the coast of the Sea of Japan. Japan as a nation has one of the highest rates of suicide in the world, and a recent survey found that 1 in 5 Japanese men and women have seriously considered taking their lives. The financial recession has only deepened personal despair, and driven the suicide rate higher. The Tojinbo cliffs on the western coast of Japan are a well-known site for those contemplating their own end. They climb the cliffs, not looking at the beautiful view, but staring at the ground, and then hurl themselves over the edge. Yukio Shige spends his days at the cliffs stopping people from jumping. For the last five years, Shige has gone there, binoculars in hand, to spot where folks are standing and preparing to jump, and he works his way toward them and talks them out of it. He's used his savings, set up a non-profit foundation to help him in his efforts, and even the Japanese Government has committed monies to supporting his work.

Shige says he's stopped about 188 potential suicides. Once he manages to talk them off the cliffs, he takes them to his little office where he offers them a dish of sticky rice (that is kind of the ultimate Japanese "comfort food"—like our macaroni and cheese), and an opportunity to share their stories. His caring presence clearly tells them they are not alone, even though but a few minutes earlier they felt as if there was simply no one who cared about their troubles, no one who cared whether they were perishing—either in life or death. But this is no pat "Think pleasant thoughts." He does not deny their struggles by saying, "There's nothing to be afraid of." Instead, he helps those who are financially distressed get back on their feet again. He goes to workplaces with women who have been harassed on the job, and together they confront their employers. He is brutally honest with parents when he tells them they are pushing their child toward suicide and they must change their parenting style. Like Jesus rebuking wind and wave, Shige stands up against forces that can seem overwhelming, and threaten to send people over the edge.

On the 5th anniversary of Shige's starting his suicide watch at Tojinbo, he received a handwritten letter from a man whom he had talked down off the cliffs. The 3-page letter ended by thanking Shige for helping the man gain awareness of the love that surrounded him.

Perhaps that is what you and I, as the Church, will need to do for one another, and for all people in this world as they face chaos and storm. Let them know God does indeed care about them, is there in the boat with them, and will ride out the storm alongside them. Then, as trust in God grows, despair will give way to hope, death will give way to life, and the king and his kingdom will make their glorious appearance, once again, through our lives. **AMEN.**

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