

“Getting Through the Storms”

Matthew 8:23-27

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany 2022; January 30, 2022

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Rifle, Colorado

Rev. Charles Westby, Pastor

+++++

The disciples of Jesus found themselves in a situation that we can find ourselves in. It was a storm. It was a storm of life. They were in a boat, on the Sea of Galilee. The Sea was in a rage so that the waves were “covering” the boat (Mat. 8:24). Jesus was asleep.

Matthew uses some interesting words in describing this event. To describe the storm, he uses a word that is usually used in reference to earthquakes. It is the word “seismos.” Our English word seismic comes from this word.

This word has apocalyptic connotations. For example, Jesus says in His teaching about the end of the world, “Nation will rise up against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places” (Mat. 24:7). Earthquakes is our word “seismos.”

Matthew also uses the word “seismos” in connection with Jesus’s death and resurrection. When Jesus yielded up His spirit on the cross, Matthew tells us that the veil in the temple between the outer room and the holy of holies was torn in two, from top to bottom, and the earth quaked, and rocks were split (Mat. 27:51). And then when Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of James and John, came to the tomb early on the third day, there was an earthquake (Mat. 28:2). This was caused by an angel who had come down from heaven and rolled the stone away from the entrance to Jesus’s tomb.

Matthew uses this word “seismos” in a way that is apocalyptic. It refers to something that shakes us, upsets our world, and threatens peril. It can do this in ultimate terms, like the end of the world. It can do this on a smaller scale, but that is still big to us.

Apocalyptic also has the sense of the universal and definitive actions of God in Jesus Christ in judgment and salvation. We see this in Matthew telling us that the seismos, the earthquake, accompanies Jesus’s death and resurrection. Jesus and His death and resurrection are the fork in the road for all human destiny. He is the turning point; the ultimate and absolute difference. So He is accompanied by seismos.

Matthew calls the storm on the Sea in which the disciples were caught a “seismos.” It is seismic. He uses this word to cast it in an apocalyptic light. He speaks of it as if it were of ultimate and absolute dimensions. He speaks of it as catastrophic. It was upsetting the disciples’ world. It was shaking them. It threatened peril and even death. “We are perishing,” the disciples cry out to Jesus. It is something beyond their power. It is overwhelming them. And it strikes such fear in them that they are fighting for courage against despair.

In connection with being overwhelmed, Matthew uses another interesting word. It is a word that we would not ordinarily expect to find in connection with a boat being filled with water by big waves crashing over the bow. Matthew uses a word for this that means to cover. The ESV translates this as the boat being swamped. Of course, that is how we can describe in English what happens when boats are getting filled up with water by big waves.

But here Matthew uses the word “to cover.” The boat was being covered by the waves. The King James tradition and New American Standard Bible translate it this way. This word can also have the sense of being concealed. It may also have the connotation in some contexts of being buried.

So Matthew is saying that the storm was so great that one could not see the boat anymore. The waves were so big that the boat was being buried, and the disciples with it.

Matthew is using language that makes us think of being so overwhelmed as to be covered, even buried, by the waves. And this being covered conceals our true selves from view. All we see is the storm.

So Matthew is talking about storms that can arise in life that are cataclysmic and have apocalyptic dimensions. Our lives seem to be overwhelmed by them. And life and what is good in life can seem to be concealed behind the storm. What we see is the storm, not the good, not what we truly are, not what we were meant to be. The storm seems to define what we are as far as what can be seen, and what is felt, and what is experienced. Is that it then?

No, it isn't, because there is someone else in the story. Jesus is there.

Now at first it seems like Jesus is not much help. He is sleeping. Someone might just want to say at that point, "so what" that Jesus is there. He's asleep. What good is He going to do in the situation?"

This can be so often how it seems. God is asleep. Jesus is asleep. Here I am in the storm, but God is sleeping. That is exactly what the disciples were thinking.

Why does it seem like God and Jesus are sleeping? Because they are allowing the storm to rage. Jesus is sleeping while the storm rages.

Of course, God and Jesus are not really sleeping, though they do allow storms to rage for a while in their infinite wisdom; and even allow them to bring death. Jesus as God the Son sleeping in this storm can show us this. Still, God is present. And Jesus having complete faith in the midst of it shows us that God is still in charge, no matter what it might look like on the surface.

Jesus is there. God is there in the midst of the storm.

The disciples did the right thing. They came to Jesus to wake Him up. They cried out to Him: "Lord. Save [us]. We are perishing" (Mat. 8:25).

And Jesus arose. Matthew uses the same word here that the angel used when he told the woman that Jesus was alive again: "He is not here; for He is risen, as He said" (Mat. 28:6).

Jesus arose. In the midst of the storm, He arose.

And He spoke. He rebuked the wind and the sea, and there was a great calm.

What sort of person is this that even the wind and sea obey Him? Yes indeed, what sort of a person is this who Himself was buried in the storm, yet who arose out of the midst of it. Yes indeed, who is this person who has all power over nature yet who joins us in the midst of the storm and arises in the midst of it to still it?

Now what do we see? We do not see a boat with men on it concealed, covered, even buried by waves. We see a boat on the sea with men on it in full view, alive, at peace. Things are as they should be.

Matthew paints a picture with his account of this episode in the life of Jesus and His disciples that places our lives in an apocalyptic perspective. These apocalypses can be little ones in our lives that Jesus arises and stills. They can be bigger ones where the storm brings death. On a bigger scale of human history they can be smaller shakings, and then bigger ones, and then the Big One, at the end of the age.

Jesus is there in all of these, so God is there. But it may seem that He is asleep because the storm rages, life is shaken. But Jesus shows us that God is always with us in the storm, not absent, but present.

Why does He let the storm rage? Why does He let death come? Why does He let evil seem

to have so much power and seem to so often win the day? This is one of the hardest questions of life. It is one of the hardest challenges to faith.

But what did the sleeping Jesus move the disciples to do? It moved them to come to Him and wake Him and cry out to Him? Though they were struggling with faith and Jesus even referred to them as “little faith ones,” they came to Jesus anyway in the “little” faith they had and woke Him and cried out to Him.

And He arose. In the midst of the storm, He arose. And He spoke.

And the life that was once concealed behind the storm and buried shown through as the true life. It is like what Paul says in Romans today: “The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly awaits for the revealing of the [children] of God” (Rom. 8:18-19 NKJV). “And we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body” (Rom. 8:23 NKJV).

When Jesus arises and speaks to the storm and stills it, then what we are intended to be will emerge and shine forth in Him. We live in this hope and promise, and it sees us through the storms. Amen.