

PEACE, BE STILL

TEXT: Matthew 8:23-27 (or Mark 4:35-41)

It was a small boat. Perhaps it had a short mast so that it could be aided by a sail when the breeze came wafting across the lake. And the occupants were tired. Jesus had spent the day teaching the crowds who had gathered to hear this young man with unusual stories to tell. The crowd was large, so he had found a seat in the prow of the boat where he could be seen and heard all along the shore.

Jesus had spent the day speaking in parables to the people of Galilee. It was probably one of those beautiful sunny days, where the sun's warm rays are softened by the gentle breeze from the lake. Galilee is one of the most beautiful spots in the world. Green hills roll down to the sparkling waters of Lake Gennesaret. Small fishing boats come and go as the fishermen unload their catch and begin drying their nets to be stored until the next day's venture at sea. Outdoor grills begin firing up to cook the fresh catch and hungry townspeople and fishermen begin to smell the delicious aroma of fresh-caught seafood being prepared.

But Jesus was weary. After hours of conversation with the people of Galilee, he then had to explain and clarify his parables to his disciples. As the evening breeze carried the small boat out on the sea, Jesus took his rest on a small cushion in the stern of the boat. The gentle waves lulled him into a needed sleep as the disciples too relaxed in the evening's sunset.

But our text tells us what happened next. It is not uncommon for a sudden wind to come down through the surrounding hills, funneling wind currents from several directions onto the lake. The little boat rolled and pitched in the storm, taking on water, threatening to overturn and drown all those on board. As the disciples cried in panic, Jesus slept peacefully. Finally, in desperate fear, they awoke their teacher, saying: "...do you not care if we perish?"

This story is so familiar it is easy to read it quickly and chalk it up as another miracle. But it is far more important and has more elements to it than that. This is a story of power – the power of the storm. It is a story of fear and a story of calm. Most of all, it is a story of faith – the power of faith. I'd like us to look for a moment at these elements to learn what it says to us today.

The small boat carrying the disciples had sailed out to the middle of the sea. Although the shores were visible, there was still a long way to go before the safety of the shore could be reached. As the wind increased in speed and force, its power sent the boat rocking. As the waves rose around the boat, their powerful swells knocked the disciples to the floor, and the roar deafened the men's ears. This was a powerful storm.

The sea is a powerful thing. Those of us who live in this part of the country have grown up with a healthy respect for its power as well as its beauty. For generations, many of our brothers and sisters have made their living from the sea. Although they have the advantages of modern navigational devices and boats built to withstand the rigors of the ocean, each year ships and sailors are lost in the Pacific Ocean waters.

But we needn't be fishermen to know the powers that can destroy our lives. The picture of a storm at sea can easily be translated into any of the perils or passions in which we find ourselves.

The story begins and ends with power...the most potent element of this story. The power of the storm which suddenly overtook the small boat was swift and fierce. And there are swift and fierce forces of power that affect our lives. First, there are the external forces that have a profound effect on each of us. The powers of nature seen so vividly in the Houston area as Harvey unleashed its fury; the powers of those persons who would bring calamity or destruction to our lives; the powers of alienation and death.

The reaction of the disciples to the storm was, of course, fear. As the disciples rocked helplessly in the boat, fear for their lives gripped their souls. There was no shore

within reach. Even if there were, the strong winds would pummel them back out to sea if they tried to direct their course toward land.

Have you ever been out on a stormy sea? I have – but in much bigger vessels than that which the disciples were in. But even then the awesome power of the waves and their unrelenting roll can never be forgotten.

The disciples hearts were full of fear – the power of the storm was beyond their seamanship. We too face fears – our doubts, sorrows, passions, anxieties that are beyond our own resources to handle. The grip of fear is the overriding emotion in reaction to the worldly powers which toss us about in our little ships of life.

If we can look at Power as the external forces that affect our lives, perhaps then we can view Fear as the inward forces that may well result from those Powers. These fears are born of sorrow, or doubt. They represent the force that causes us to lose our sense of direction, to question our confidence both in ourselves and in others, and to stifle our resources of courage and faith.

As the little boat rocked and swayed, this kind of fear filled the disciples with terror and a sense of powerlessness over the elements. We all see fears in many forms. Many are the unfounded anxieties over the future – things that may never come to pass. But the fear experienced by the disciples was a direct reaction to an immediate threat. We all have known these fears – when a child has wandered away in a public place; when the phone rings in the middle of the night; when the car skids out of control of a slippery road; yes, and when the wind blows at gale force and we don't know where to go for shelter and safety.

From the almost overwhelming power of the storm, through the defenselessness of fear, finally the disciples found the sense of calm. In their fear they cried for Jesus, asking: “How can you lie asleep when our very lives are threatened?” Jesus awoke and spoke to the stormy seas – “Peace, be still”. The disciples saw that he spoke with

authority. At once the waves calmed and the sea returned to its gentle rolling, and the frightened men in the little boat were filled with wonder. Matthew says, “What sort of man is this, that even the winds and sea obey him?” The disciples moved quickly from the fear that had nearly overwhelmed them, to the sense of calm that came as Jesus displayed his mastery over the elements.

This sense of calm – of peace – can be very symbolic. When the disciples realized the presence of Jesus with them, their storm became calm. Once they knew he was there, a fearless peace entered their hearts. There, on the sea, the presence of Jesus provided a calm, a peace, to their hearts.

This is what happens in our lives – the storms of sorrow come to us all, but Jesus provides his everlasting peace, even in death. Our life’s problems bring torrents of doubt and tension and uncertainty. If we will only be still and listen for his voice with open hearts and minds, we will find his guidance is the way to peace.

The biggest difficulty in finding this peace is worry – worry about our lives, worry about those we love, worry about the future. We must learn to listen for the peace of God to direct us – to guide our lives and our futures. Until we can calm the storms of our fears and passions, we cannot hear the calm voice that says, “Peace, be still”.

The final lesson from the story is of Faith. And, most importantly, the power that comes to each of us from our faith in the power and authority of Jesus Christ. Here is where the story has its greatest symbolism for us today. H.L. Mencken has said, “Faith may be defined briefly as an illogical belief in the occurrence of the impossible”. As the storm battered and tossed the little boat – as the destructive powers in our lives batter and storm us – we respond in panic and fear. But, as the disciples sought help from their Master, so we seek guidance through Jesus Christ.

The story is told of a little boy crossing the ocean with his father, who was captain of the ship, when they ran into a storm. The waves tossed the ship about like a cork and

everyone was stricken with fear. But the boy sat still, with his eyes directed toward a certain spot. He sat there quite unperturbed as the ship was being dashed about by the waves. Someone asked him if he were not afraid, and he answered: “I have my eye on that little window, and through that window I can see the bridge, and on that bridge is my father. My father is the captain of the ship, and he has taken it through many storms.”

Here is the epitome of faith. This little boy knew his father well and had no question about who was in control. His father was the pilot of his ship, and he knew that no matter what happened during the voyage, he and all the others aboard would be brought safely to port. We, too, have a pilot. What we need to remember when the power of the storm batters our lives, is that our pilot has greater power to still the storm and guide us throughout our journey.

There are several ways to look at this story. Skeptics have proposed rationalizations about a natural subsistence of the storm at the moment Jesus spoke. But this would only make the disciples out as dupes and Jesus as a fraud. Or if this story is only about an incident in the lives of Jesus and his disciples, although it is a wonderful story, it would have no real relevance for us today. But the intent of the story is to show God’s authority at work through Jesus – and this is the other side of the power we spoke of earlier. The power Jesus held was displayed in his authority over the elements. After the sea was calmed, the disciples were “filled with awe”. Matthew says “the men marveled”. And Luke says “they were afraid”. In each of the three Gospels the disciples asked in wonder, “Who then is this, that he commands even wind and water, and they obey him?” “What sort of man is this?” Jesus made the disciples aware that through his life God was at work.

The story is relevant for us today. We could ask “Why does he not do it now? Why does he allow those who love him in today’s world to be drowned in the raging sea without intervening to save them?” But the message is clear – wherever Jesus is, the storms of life become calm. When the storms of life shake our souls, Jesus Christ is

there, and in his presence the raging of the storm turns to the peace that no storm can ever take away. The presence of Jesus brings the worst tempest to peace.

And this is the point of the story. There, on a sea once stormy and threatening, but now calm and peaceful, the disciples were given the revelation of one of the mysteries of the kingdom – the power of Jesus. Here they saw that he does the very things God can do. As he spoke to calm the raging elements, he speaks to us saying ‘Peace, be still’ - “Be still and know that I am God” – “My peace I leave with you”. In his narrative of this unusual story Matthew brings us beyond nature miracles to the real Jesus Christ – with all the power of God. We are called to a life of faith and trust under the authority of Jesus Christ who is our pilot over all of life’s tempestuous seas. Amen.