

Third Sunday after Pentecost

When You Walk Through a Storm

Mark 4:35-41

Third Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 7)

Analysis by Norb Kabelitz

35On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." 36And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. 37A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. 38But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher do you not care that we are perishing?" 39He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. 40He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" 41And they were filled with great awe (a terrible, "holy" fear?) and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

DIAGNOSIS: We Are Dying!

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Fear of the "Perfect Storm"*

The Galilean storm is no comparison for Sebastian Junger's Perfect Storm off the coast of Nova Scotia where the Andrea Gail was swamped by swells of over 100 feet in October of 1991. But both share the unexpected. "There was virtually no warning" in 1991, and no warning from weather watchers in Galilee. "A great windstorm arose," a no-name storm. While we on the gulf coast

name “windstorms”-Charley, Frances, Ivan, Jeanne, Katrina-naming doesn’t seem to make them manageable or fix our fear. “She’s coming on boys, coming on strong!” And how does one respond to a South Asian tsunami (December 2004) that came so unexpectedly, and swept away 250,000 (not just a dozen disciples). While one may use storms like these as a metaphor or allegory of “the daily storms of life” and pray the fishermen’s prayer, “Dear God, be good to me, the sea is so wide and my boat is so small,” the question put to disciples is always, “Why are you afraid?” (deiloi = “cowardly”).

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *When Fearfulness Is Faithlessness*

Psalms 107 appointed for this day graphically describes the panic created by stormy seas and high tossed waves of the sea. “Their hearts melted because of their peril. They reeled and staggered like drunkards and were at their wits end.” Psychologists and counselors will tell us that there are many situations in which fear is most appropriate, and we should never berate ourselves because of our fears. But what if our fears are linked to “faithlessness”? Jesus makes that connection! “Have you still no faith?” Not knowing who Jesus is seems to be at the root of the disciples’ (and our) cowardice, timidity, fear. So profound and destructive is this ignorance that they will eventually abandon Jesus (Mark 14:50). Without trust in who Jesus is for us, we become flotsam in storms on the sea or in stormy metaphors and analogies on land. This diagnosis is more profound and devastating than F. D. R.’s warning, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”

Stage 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *When God Becomes a Threat*

Jesus rebukes not only our fear of loss and perishing, but also our vote of “no confidence,” our lack of faith. Without faith in the promising God, God becomes the “hidden God,” a threat

overpowering and drowning us in our own terror and unbelief. As the disciples so aptly put the question to Jesus, “Do you not care that we are dying?” Their rebuke of Jesus expresses not “little faith” but “no faith.” (Matthew gives them “little faith”; Mark gives them none; Luke has Jesus ask, “Where is your faith?”) Without faith the storm demons win. All that remains is for us to curse God (like Job) and die. We rebuke God. We are dying, and it appears God does not care. We fear things (like storms) more than God. “Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin” (Romans 14:23). This “sin,” and no other, condemns us. What shall we cry? “Lord I believe, help my unbelief?” Am I able to do that when I cannot by my own reason and strength believe? What is the antidote to such servile fear?

PROGNOSIS: The Presence of the Promising God

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Jesus Exorcises the Storm*

The Psalm declares “then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He stilled the storm to a whisper and quieted the waves of the sea.” The Gospel text is a portion of Mark 1-8, a portrait of Jesus as the powerful Son of God able to overcome disease, sin, demons, and death. This section is in sharp contrast to Mark 9-15 which features Jesus’ prospects as the suffering and crucified Son of God. Is there a bridge between the two? Has Jesus been given authority over the chaos of life’s threats because he himself has engaged it with his own flesh and blood all the way through the storms of unbelief and yet trusts God to bring good out of evil? He who has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows, still cries out, “Into your hands I commend my spirit!” In Jesus we see one who “fears and loves God above all things!” Doesn’t his promising presence enable us to see in him the one of whom we can say, “If God is for us who (or what) can be against us?”

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : Holy Fear and Faith

The combination of a holy fear and faith in him comes from the believer's experience and belief that the fear of God is a positive thing and our fear of things a negative one. So how can we "fear and love God above all things"? Luther teaches us that we cannot "naturally" fear God in any positive sense. Rudolph Otto, in "The Idea of the Holy," claims we cannot know a holy fear of God on our own. (See also Thursday Theology #237, Bob Bertram's "To Fear or Not to Fear"). We look then to Jesus who provides a promising note when he teaches us about fear. "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy [or save!] both soul and body in [from] Gehenna" (Matthew 10:28). Is this why the Apology (Article XII, p.193:38) counsels: "Moreover... it is possible to define clearly filial fear as an anxiety that has been joined to faith, that is, where faith consoles and sustains the anxious heart. Servile fear, faith does not sustain the anxious heart"? Faith looks to the promising God who so loved (in this way) that he gave his only Son. This is the promise to which faith clings in the midst of anxiety. No wonder Nicholas Brady (1696) rhymed a hymn around Psalm 34 with the exhortation, "Fear Him, ye saints, and you will then have nothing else to fear!" (Lutheran Hymnal #29, 1941, Concordia Publishing House). "For we do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live we live to the Lord, and if we die we die to the Lord; so then whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and rose again that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living" (Romans 14:7-9). Filial fear gets joined to faith. The antidote for most of our fears is in fact fear-a holy fear of the Lord. Does 4:41 move them in that direction? "They were afraid with a great fear" (phobethesan phobon megan). (See also 1 Peter 1:17)

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Jesus, Savior, Pilot Me*

Will it be “Jesus, Savior, Pilot Me” (LBW #334) or “Eternal Father, Strong to Save” (LBW #467)? Or Roger and Hammerstein’s “You’ll Never Walk Alone”? The latter would have you walk with “hope in your heart” because at the end of the storm is a “golden sky and the sweet silver song of a lark.” We could use its lyrics by identifying Christ as our hope, but it cannot match the commanding voice of Christ who says, “Peace, Be still!” In Christ the “Perfect Storm” meets its Master. Did you ever wonder why the space inside the church is called a “nave,” (from novis), a ship? Looking to the ceiling suggests an “upturned ship.” We are on this journey together with “Christ in our ship.” Where two or three are gathered in “my name”— didn’t Christ say, “I am there”? And he is , in the Word and the Meal!