

*“Have You Still No Faith?”*

Psalm 107: 23-32    Mark 4: 35-41

If you’ve read the Bible at all, you know that most of the significant characters found their faith tested. They were pushed to the brink many times. And throughout the Bible is typically candid enough to detail the failures as well as the successes. Even Abraham fell on the ground laughing when he was told that he would have children quite soon. Moses tried every excuse to keep from going back to Egypt. Elijah ran in fear only to get coaxed out of a cave by the presence of God. Jesus got his come-uppance from a Samaritan woman, and lost his cool altogether in the Temple marketplace. Peter denied Jesus, and Paul was Saul, the fearsome Christian persecutor before his conversion. These are hardly the kind of faith stories that you would expect about the pillars of your faith tradition. No one looks too good.

Our scriptures deal with fear amid stormy seas. I don’t know how much experience you have with storms when you’re out on the water, but it can be pretty hair-raising. Most day sailors know enough to stay put when bad weather is in the forecast.

I do remember being out on a 25 foot day-sailer on a day when the wind was good and strong. An old guy, Bob Patterson, liked me – I don’t know why – and he would take me out in his boat. He was old, had a heart condition, and needed an able mate. I was the best he could find. The wind was gusty but it looked like a good day to take a spin around the harbor. The waves were choppy as we set out, and then the wind picked up even more and we started getting slammed by white-capped waves. This was still inside Hempstead Harbor, not on Long Island Sound (thankfully). There wasn’t a storm – there were fair weather clouds – but the wind kept increasing. We needed to head into the waves which made for a very bumpy ride; if we tried to straddle between the waves, we could easily get rolled over and capsized. Waves may be made of water, and you could normally slide through them, but these were like hitting a speed bump too fast – wham ... wham ... wham. Let’s say I was glad when we got back to dry land.

If you haven’t been out on the water in rough weather, maybe you’ve seen the George Clooney movie, “The Perfect Storm.” It’s based on a true story of the loss at sea of the commercial fishing boat *Andrea Gail* in what was called “The Perfect Storm” of 1991. The movie poster showed this rather small fishing boat scaling a massive, overwhelming wave. That alone could give you reason enough not to go out on the Gulf or on a Royal Caribbean cruise for that matter.

Psalm 107 is full of thanksgiving and goes into details about different kinds of sufferings. It opens with what would be something of a refrain throughout: *Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever.* The actual refrain is: *Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men, for he ...* whatever – satisfied the thirsty and hungry, broke through the bars for the imprisoned, saved the sinfully foolish, and saved those threatened at sea. Those threatened at sea are the particular focus of our selection from Psalm 107.

These were veteran seamen on merchant vessels, familiar with the mighty force of the seas. They knew its vastness and what it could do when stirred up.

Then we learn that *[The Lord] spoke and stirred up a tempest that lifted high the waves*. Hey, it's God who is making things messed up here! And God is doing a good job of it.

This sounds like some awful roller coaster ride: *They [the sailors] mounted up to the heavens and went down to the depths*. It sounds like a scene from the movie "The Perfect Storm;" the vessel couldn't have been much bigger. Although experienced sailors, *in their peril, their courage melted away. They reeled and staggered like drunken men; they were at their wit's end*. "Reeling and staggering like drunken men" is a perfect description of what it's like to move about on a boat that is getting tossed around on the waves. You grab onto whatever you can for dear life as movement becomes nearly impossible, and any movement away from a firm grip sacrifices your slim hold on safety.

Like we would also hear in the story of Jonah, trying to flee from God on a boat bound for Tarshish, caught up in a God-inspired storm. The sailors demand that Jonah call out to his god, but we never hear Jonah do that. His silence is likely due to his knowing full well why God had summoned this awful storm – him and his own disobedience! Calling out to God was useless; he knew exactly why there was a storm and what God wanted to stop it.

In Psalm 107, the sailors cry out to God, and it says: *[God] stilled the storm to a whisper; the waves of the sea were hushed*.

I'm sure you recognize the odd nature of God creating a nasty storm for these sailors, who petition God, the Author of the storm, to save them, and then God saves them from the storm that God created.

There are a couple of points to be made here. One is that in the cultures and traditions of the peoples outside of Judaism, the gods were malicious and spiteful, greedy and willful, overbearing and self-absorbed. The understandings of those people would have been more like: a god was angry and created a storm. Or a god wanted more offerings and created a storm. Or a god got bored and thought messing with that stupid little boat on the sea would be entertaining. The testimony of Psalm 107 is that God blesses God's faithful, and is deserving of thanksgiving and praise. This God actually cares for God's people unlike the gods of other cultures and traditions.

That leads to the question: why **did** God create the storm then? It is amid the storms of life that God moves from a background comfort to an urgent player in real time. If it's smooth sailing, then all is good and God is not such a priority compared to the heavy traffic on the way to Publix, the rain preventing your gardening, what to cook for dinner, what gift to get your kid on their birthday, and which pew to sit in on Sunday when guests have sat in "your" pew. What is your faith like? Let a storm smack your life, tossing you around like a turbulent sea, and you'll find out. Also, God will find out.

Those cherished characters from scripture who faced storms often faced storms that God sent them into. In the storm, we learn more about God and the ways of our God, and hopefully also what God wants from us and how God has empowered us beyond our previous understanding.

Turning to the other stormy passage, we resume where we left off last week. Jesus has been standing in a boat teaching the crowds in parables about the Kingdom of God. As the day was ending and darkness was setting in, that's when Jesus decides to cross the Sea of Galilee – a decent sized lake – to get to “the other side” – a rather non-descript destination which is quite irrelevant to the story.

It is odd that it says: *Leaving the crowds behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat.* “Just as he was”? What was he supposed to do, change into his night clothes for sleeping, or into his sporty sailing clothes? No commentator spends any time with this odd fragment [not even Gundry!!] that probably refers to Jesus already being in a boat for his teaching, some disciples joining him to crew the boat for the crossing, and Jesus being there “just as he was” when teaching.

The narrator describes other boats besides the one with Jesus, suggesting that all of the twelve may not have fit into one or even two boats, or that Jesus' “posse” had grown to require several boats. As story goes, the other boats disappear from the story-telling; they don't matter, only the one with Jesus in it.

Even on a modest body of water like Lake Weir, a sudden storm can turn into a scary experience. Here, Jesus is asleep in the stern on a cushion with waves breaking over the boat. This entirely echoes Jonah which says: *But Jonah had gone below deck where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep.* The boat with Jesus had no “below deck,” but we see the parallel of blissfully sleeping through a storm at sea, as one typically does, right? The disciples wake up Jesus and say: *“Teacher, don't you care if we drown?”* In Jonah, it says: *The captain went to him and said, “How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us and we will not perish.”* The parallel ends as Jesus gets up and rebukes the wind and the waves, and the wind died down and the waves became calm. Jesus has no need to appeal to his God; he is as one with his God and commands the wind and waves himself. In Jonah, the sea becomes calm once Jonah is tossed overboard, a sacrifice to Jonah's God, and Jonah's God turns his attention from the boat to Jonah himself. Enter big fish.

Jesus then expresses his dismay with his disciples, probably cranky at having been awakened from a nice sleepy time. *Why are you so afraid?* Like, a little fear and upset would be okay, but to go into full blown panic mode seems like over-reacting. Jesus knows the answer and asks the pointy question: *Have you still no faith?* There is no verbal answer, but the narrator states: *They were terrified.*

It's probably no accident that *they were terrified now*, by the suddenly transformed image of Jesus from teacher/healer into the one who commands nature itself, like the Creator, like God. They actually understood the stormy waters and

howling winds better than they understood this guy who had just shut the whole storm down. *Now* they were terrified!

And they say: *“Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!”* They thought they understood Jesus from his teaching, from his healing, from his challenges with the religious authorities, and from his popularity among the people. This broke that mold. This Jesus was **far** more than what they had thought.

Jesus thought he had demonstrated exactly who he is to the disciples – hence his dismay at their lack of faith – but it was clear they were still learning about Jesus as well as how to live a life in faith in him.

Like I said before, it is in the midst of stormy events in our lives that our faith gets awakened from its sideline position in the good times. In that awakening, chances are best that you will get stretched and exercised in ways you had not expected. Those are God’s hands re-forming your life, your faith, and your promise. As the folks at sea in the Psalm and in the gospel discovered, God is ever-present. God’s promise is not a fair weather promise. It’s there all the time but we get awakened to it most often when the waves start rocking and rolling our safe, placid lives.

It turns out that Jesus not only has God’s eyes and ears, Jesus has God’s hands as well. In those stormy times, if you’re seeking the One who will ride out the storm with you and bring the tumult to rest, Jesus will give you one of those hands.