

Sermon – June 20, 2021

“A Perfect Storm”

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Scripture: Mark 4: 35-41, Job 38:1-11

In the complex world of meteorology, an academic study I cannot begin to wrap my head around, there are all sort of weather phenomena whose potential for devastation is sometimes not realized until it's too late. This is true even today with all our advanced equipment, but has especially been true in the past. As a person who loves, but also has a healthy respect for the sea and its power, I can think of no more vulnerable place to be during a storm than out at sea. Anytime I visit my Donna in her hometown in the UK and we walk by the shoreline of Plymouth Sound on dreary days—and in England, there are a *lot* of those—, I look out at the array of vessels on the water and think about how grateful I am to be on shore and able to get to safety, should the winds kick up and the rain begin falling harder.

To most of us, ships caught out at sea probably bring to mind movies like, “The Perfect Storm” the film made 21 years ago about the true story of the crew of the *Andrea Gail*, a sword fishing boat lost at sea during one of the most powerful nor'easters in recent memory, The No-name storm of 1991 in which a nor'easter absorbed Hurricane grace and formed a cyclone. The *Andrea Gail* was out at sea at the time trying to get to shore, but ultimately succumbed to the winds and waves, causing the death of all six members of the crew. The film depicts their fight to stay afloat and alive in spectacularly dramatic fashion, giving us a glimpse into some semblance of what that final voyage and the terror of their final moments may have looked like.

As I read the scriptures this week, I was reminded of this movie and the impact its story had on me. It was the first time I really thought about how dangerous the wild oceans of our beautiful world can be. Even in today's ships, which can survive much more for much longer, storms at sea can be a terrifying experience. As I think about the disciples

in this very simple little vessel back in the first century of the common era, I can't imagine the dread they must have felt as they began facing rough seas, rain, and powerful winds, while their own skipper, Jesus, snoozed in the stern. I always try to put myself in the place of the people in this story. I can't understand Jesus's ability to sleep here because I do not have the assurance of being God made flesh and knowing that I will get to the other side of the ocean. I can, however, imagine the fear inherent in the experience of the disciples. Recall now that they are traveling through first century Galilee and across the sea. Galilean boats of this time were small and made primarily of cedar wood with some other scraps thrown in there, with joints and nails. They would have been simple containing a mast and four places in the boat spread out for rowers. This boat is 27 feet long and about 7 feet wide, so probably not much bigger than the chancel (or the area within the rail here) is. So, imagine being inside a boat about this size in the middle of the Sea of Galilee, when suddenly a storm moves in. I read this week that the hills that surround the Sea of Galilee actually funnel storms down into it—they can be sudden and devastating, so crossing on calm waters was never a sure bet. Here you are in this boat, one of the disciples, winds kicking up around you, rain pouring down, and powerful waves are tossing you all over the place while you, number one, try to hold on (you do not have a life jacket) and, number two, see that your captain, the one in charge, the one with the power to help you, is asleep at the wheel. Would you not be terrified? Worried for your life? Wondering what the what is up with Jesus that he's not only not worried, but sound asleep!

At first blush, we might think this is a story about fear versus trust. And we wouldn't be wrong. The disciples were afraid the storm in this little boat and, in their fear, try to wake their Lord, who, while sleeping, seems not to care about the fate of all aboard. How could he sleep while their lives are at stake? Indeed, Jesus, himself calls out their lack of faith that he will bring them through this storm safely. "Why are you afraid?" He asks, "Have you still no faith?" Jesus calls out their lack of faith, yes, but what's interesting here is that they do seem to have some sense that Jesus *can* help them, they just seem to doubt that he will. They do not ask, "Teacher, can you help us?" They ask, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" They have faith in the power he has after seeing

the miracles he has performed, but worry that he simply doesn't care. And this, to me, is curious because in order to perform the miracles he has already performed, he certainly *must* care, otherwise, why perform the miracles? They are done out of a deep sense of empathy and love for the humanity of each individual he comes across—a level of empathy and care that far surpasses that of the people around him, religiously, politically, or culturally.

They worry about their Lord's capacity to care about their well-being, and perhaps, his own, but they do not question his power. On some level, they must know that Jesus will make it to the other side and, that if he does, they will, too. But in the midst of the storm, overwhelmed with fear and panic, it's impossible for them to see how that will happen. Instead of thinking through their situation in the clear-headed way, they begin to freak out and, frankly, who in the same situation wouldn't? But their fear isn't that Jesus lacks power, only that Jesus lacks empathy for their plight. And sure, he's had some harsh words for them, particularly when they seem not to "get it," but Jesus never doesn't care.

It's tempting in life to worry about the same things. I don't know about you, but I, like the disciples, never imagine that God's not powerful enough to be in control of any particular situation. Our God, as the song says, is an awesome God. In our Old Testament Lesson for today, Job gets a dressing down by God that illuminates for him just how powerful God is. Job 38:1, "Then the Lord answers Job out of the whirlwind: 'Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?'... and then verse 4, 'Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know!'

In his humanity and hubris, Job asks for explanations, and God indicates here, in part, that sometimes those explanations aren't what matters. We aren't the center of the universe, what if it's not about us? Not everything bad that happens has or even warrants an explanation. Sometimes bad things just happen? Sometimes a storm comes out of nowhere and we just have to ride it out.

But that's hard, isn't it? We know the Triune God has power beyond our comprehension and we profess a God who loves what God has created, but sometimes, like the disciples and like Job, we doubt God's empathy for us because we see so many bad things in the world. We want to know why, how, and then we want it made better. We want things to be fixed, and not just fixed, but fixed *our way*. In the midst of life's storms when nothing seems to be going right, it can be easy to fall into the trap of thinking God is asleep in the stern. We think God is so distant, disinterested, and dispassionate about our suffering that God is, for all intents and purposes, asleep. But that's simply not the case. It's not that God has abandoned Job, as Job goes on to see. And it's not that Jesus has abandoned the disciples or that he wants to sleep while they are destroyed. It's that sometimes, we have to ride out life's storms. Sometimes, we have to endure. Sometimes life is hard and we don't and can't know all the reasons why we suffer. We can't know why the *Andrea Gail* had to go down in the Atlantic Ocean in the midst of that "Perfect Storm." We can't know why tragic events happen to good people. I think, perhaps, it's because humanity and creation are not perfect, are not God, and therefore, obviously, imperfect things will occur—some of those things will be absolutely devastating as many of us can attest. But God has given us a spirit that will endure. Life does go on, as they say. God doesn't abandon Job in his suffering anymore than Jesus abandons the disciples in the midst of the storm—rather, Creator, Son, and Spirit are with us always, through life's troubles and travails. We might feel alone, but we never truly are. What's asked of us is trust, trust that even amidst the worst this world has to offer, our faith in God is not misplaced. Even a sleeping God is in control. And thank God for that because there are so many things in this life that are out of our control.

Last week, we talked about the seed parables and that the farmer must leave behind the seeds he's scattered, trusting that the seeds and all the other pieces of that scientific puzzle will take care of the rest. The same is true in life. Sometimes, when things are going spectacularly badly (as they have for this last 17 months, for instance), we need to trust that the God who brought us to our circumstances will bring us through them, come what may. And what will it look like to go "through" them? Well, only God

knows that. We don't need to know all the answers, that's not what faith is. Our job as people of faith is to trust that God is still alive and working, speaking the future into existence, regardless of the winds and rains and crashing waves that surround us. Because, as the angel says to Mary in Luke 1: "with God, nothing shall be impossible." Nothing shall be impossible. Not a virgin birth. Not a tiny ship surviving the battering of the sea in the midst of a storm. Not the end of pandemic sweeping through the world. Not the growth of a community of faith that's struggled to find new members. No. With God. Nothing. Shall. Be. Impossible. And that's good news. Amen.