

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S "A COMMUNITY OF HOPE"

Sleeping Giants Third Sunday After Pentecost June 21, 2009

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That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, "Let us go over to the other side." 36 Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. 37 A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. 38 Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" 39 He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. 40 He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" 41 They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"

I'm not much of a sailor, so whenever I read the gospel accounts of the disciples riding the waves in the storm on the Sea of Galilee, I get a little queasy. Mark makes it clear that this was a killer storm: **"the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped."** You may have heard that there are three stages of seasickness. Stage one is where you're afraid you're going to be sick. Stage two comes when you're afraid you're going to die. You've hit stage three when you're afraid you're *not* going to die.

The disciples are too terrified to be seasick. They know they're going to die. Most of them were experienced fishermen. The Sea of Galilee was their workplace. They sailed on it every day. They knew a killer storm when they saw one. But they had trusted Jesus enough that when he wanted to cross the Sea of Galilee by boat in the evening, they went along. The fishermen allowed the

carpenter to set their boat's course for them all. And when, as frequently happens on the Sea of Galilee, this deadly storm blows up and puts them all in mortal danger, Jesus the landlubber is, of all things, sound asleep!

They wake him up and yell over the howling wind, **"Teacher, don't you care if we drown?"** Jesus does two things. First, he stands up in this pitching boat and *yells* at the storm. And second, Jesus reprimands these sailors and fishermen for being afraid. Actually, the Greek means "cowardly" or "timid": **"Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"** If we had been in the boat with the disciples, I'm sure most of us at some point would have come to the same preliminary conclusion as the disciples: Jesus is crazy, and the disciples aren't. Earlier in Mark's account, in chapter 3, verse 21, Jesus' own family had come to take him home because they thought he had lost his mind.

From the disciples' point of view, crossing the Sea of Galilee with a storm coming on is crazy. Sleeping in the middle of a killer storm with waves coming into the boat is crazy. On the other hand, being scared to death in this situation is perfectly appropriate and makes perfect sense. What about yelling at the storm? The character that comes to mind is Shakespeare's King Lear out on the heath, shouting at the storm—but he's crazy. In his madness, Lear is defying the crashing chaos of the storm. Shakespeare's point is that by defying this chaos and violence and hardship, Lear comes out stronger and saner.

But it's completely different with Jesus. Mark makes it clear that when Jesus yells at the storm, it stops: **"He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, 'Quiet! Be still!' Then the wind died down and it was completely calm."** Our preliminary conclusion is completely backwards. Jesus isn't crazy. He's the Lord and Master of all creation. He doesn't defy the storm. He rules it.

He's given the disciples abundant evidence of who he is. When he called them to follow him, he told them they would eventually be catching people, not fish. They would be gathering disciples to Jesus. (Mark 1:17) They stood and watched as he commanded evil spirits to come out of people, spirits who identified him as **"the Holy One of God!" (Mark 1:24)** They were in the house when Jesus forgave the sins of the paralyzed man let down through the roof by his friends, and then demonstrated his authority to forgive by instantly healing the man. That very day they had listened to him describe the Kingdom of God to the crowds in parables, but openly and explicitly explain it to them.

Why should the disciples be afraid of a storm when Jesus, the Holy One of God, is in the boat with them? Why, when he calms the storm and reprimands them for their cowardice, are they terrified and ask, **"Who is this?"**

Even the wind and the waves obey him!" We can find the answer to their question in the Psalms.

Open your Prayer Books if you will to page 714. Read with me Psalm 89, verses 8 and 9:

8 Who is like you, Lord God of hosts? *

O mighty Lord, your faithfulness is all around you.

9 You rule the raging of the sea *

and still the surging of its waves.

This is only one of many passages in the Psalms and Prophets where God is described as calming the waves of the sea. Are they just metaphors? Absolutely not! In the boat with the disciples is the Lord God of Hosts himself. So who's really asleep here? Please turn to page 779, and let's read together the first four verses of Psalm 121:

1 I lift up my eyes to the hills; *

from where is my help to come?

2 My help comes from the Lord, *

the maker of heaven and earth.

3 He will not let your foot be moved *

and he who watches over you will not fall asleep.

4 Behold, he who keeps watch over Israel *

shall neither slumber nor sleep;

“He who watches over you will not fall asleep . . . he who keeps watch over Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.” Jesus was asleep in the bow of the boat, but that in no way diminished the disciples' safety. These passages and others like them from Moses, the Psalms and the Prophets all describe the majesty and authority of Almighty God himself. That's who this is in the boat with the disciples.

It's the disciples who are asleep here, not Jesus. He **“rules the raging of the sea and stills the surging of its waves,”** as we just read from

Psalm 89. He “**neither slumbers nor sleeps,**” but watches over and protects them.

Jesus has made his direction and purpose perfectly clear to these men: to make them fishers of men in order to bring men and women, and boys and girls into the Kingdom of God. Jesus knows what he’s doing, even when he’s asleep: furthering God’s purpose and direction. He has no other agenda. The reason the disciples’ preliminary conclusion is so entirely wrong is that they have a very different purpose and direction: to get to the other side of the lake in one piece.

Of course, they didn’t stay that way. This event occurs in what you might call “Season One” of the disciples’ life and ministry with Jesus. “Season One” opens when Jesus calls the twelve disciples, and it’s during “Season One” that he teaches them about the Kingdom of God, gives them power and authority to heal and cast out demons, calls them apostles, and so forth. “Season Two” is Jesus’ betrayal by Judas, his trial, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension to the right hand of the Father. Then comes “Season Three”, which begins when the Father and the Son pour out the Holy Spirit and the apostles go all over the world to preach the gospel.

By “Season Three” just getting across the lake, so to speak, isn’t good enough for these same disciples. Every one of them except John gave their lives to spread the great good news of the Kingdom of God in Jesus Christ. Jesus’ direction and purpose had become their direction and purpose. They knew whom they could rely on: the one who stills the storms and watches over his own, who never slumbers nor sleeps. That day the disciples were asleep to what Jesus was doing, but later they woke up. Over their years with Jesus, the Lord of Creation, he made them fearless giants for the Lord in whose shadow we are still living today. The disciples in the boat that day were sleeping giants.

“Season Three” is still in progress. Every one of us who has accepted Jesus as Savior and Lord are part of furthering his direction and purpose. Most of us want to chart our own course in this life so that we can avoid the storms and get to the other side in one piece. But remember, Jesus sent this boatload of disciples out into the storm. It was his idea to cross the lake, not theirs. They were scared to death, but he saved them, and then chewed them out for being timid.

Each of us needs to ask ourselves: “What am I afraid of?” The economy? Losing my financial security? Losing my health? Am I afraid to be honest about something in a relationship with someone? Am I afraid of death? Let me remind us all that Jesus’ goal for himself and for us is not to get to the other side unscathed. It’s to further God’s direction and purposes in this world.

Jesus didn't save the disciples before the storm. He saved them after they got into it, and they got into it because he sent them there.

He who watches over us neither slumbers nor sleeps. His salvation and our security are absolutely assured—either in this life or in the next. For some of us the promise that our rescue from our troubles may come in the next life sounds like cold comfort, but it isn't. Life in this world is not all there is, and every one of us needs to face that. We can't be like the man in the group in the leaky lifeboat where everybody was furiously bailing water over the side to keep afloat. From his seat at the stern he was heard to say, "I sure am glad that leak is up at the other end!" Absolute security in this world is false security. We're all in the same boat—and Jesus is here with us.

As a church also we must realize that our goal isn't to get through this life in one piece, but to be fishers of men, bringing people into the Kingdom of God. We are in the boat with Jesus. He has set the course, and there may be storms ahead. Without him, we are frightened sailors. With him—we are sleeping giants, ready to awaken in his faith to see him still the storms of death and sin and misery in the lives of all those around us who are tossed in the storms of life.

Let us pray.