

Our scripture this morning is another familiar story for most of us, this time from the New Testament and a story of Jesus instead of his great ancestor David, as we had last week. It's a story that I imagine has a lot of resonance for many of you who grew up in this area. Seattle is a town with deep historical and emotional links to the sea and to boats. Founded as a trading port and later the beneficiary of a wave of immigrant expansion, led by Scandinavian fishermen, Seattle is still economically tied to its port. For most, though, the experience of our waterways has become a recreational issue. It's revelatory of the importance of the water to Seattle culture, I think, that the great civic celebration of summer is called "Seafair" and that one of the signal unofficial holidays of the year is opening day of the boating season. Even our great sports teams (Sorry, hoops fans, I don't include the Sonics) are connected with Seattle's lakes and sound, the Seahawks and the Mariners.

I think one of the reasons that I love this area so much is that much of my own history is tied to water. Born near the banks of America's great inland waterway, the mighty Mississippi River, some of my earliest memories are of the beach near my early boyhood home in Clearwater, Florida. After leaving there, my family lived not far from the Atlantic in England and again on Long Island. When I was in college in Houston, my favorite weekend activity was to catch a ride down to the beach in Galveston or on Bolivar peninsula. I loved to read tales of the sea when I was a boy, although I've only recently bought my first copy of one of Patrick O'Brian's celebrated sea novels. As I got older, I learned to love poetry about the sea, too, like John Masefield's "Sea Fever":

"I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky,  
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by;"

That's also a favorite of one of my fictional heroes, James T. Kirk, described by his creator, Gene Roddenberry, as "Horatio Hornblower in outer space." It all comes back to the sea.

I must confess, though, that my own relationship with the water is somewhat ambiguous. I didn't learn to swim until I was about 12, have never been a strong swimmer, and am always somewhat nervous aboard a boat. This aquatic timidity also stems from family history. My paternal grandfather, John Boyer, was a riverboat pilot on the Mississippi, guiding tugs and barges full of cargo through the narrow and shifting channels on the great river. When my father was 13, John was killed in a tragic accident. A logging crew on shore allowed a tree to fall out into the river just as my grandfather's boat was passing. The tree struck my grandfather, knocking him unconscious and out of the boat. He drowned and, as a result, my father was never enthusiastic about any of us actually being in the water, although we did go to the shore a lot. So, rather than Masefield's poem, perhaps my attitude toward the water is better summed up by a stanza of Byron's epic, Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, which I learned as a vocal warm-up in my early theatre days:

"Roll on, thou deep and dark blue Ocean--roll!  
Ten thousand fleets sweep over thee in vain;  
Man makes the earth with ruin--his control  
Stops with the shore."

Historically, the Jewish people were quite familiar with the concept that human beings had no control over the watery environment beyond the shore. Like others of their land-faring neighbors, the Babylonians for example, the ancient Hebrews saw the sea as the embodiment of

chaos and danger. We can still find echoes of this in Genesis 1:2 where we read of the formless void of waters, dark and dangerous, where the Spirit of God began to move and that God, in verse 6, subdues to create dry land. It is a uniquely monotheistic spin on a creation story that is otherwise quite similar to many others where two gods of nearly equal strength, one of heaven and one of the sea, fight until the land is created. To the Jews, only Yahweh, the one true God, could master the waters. They were not a sea-going people, by and large. The relative security of the lake or Sea of Galilee, storm-tossed though it is, was all they generally cared to venture. The relative vastness of the Mediterranean, which the Greeks and later the Romans made into their own private lake, was simply too daunting for the people descended, as Deuteronomy 26:5 puts it, from “a wandering Aramaean.”

In the words of the Anglican commentator, John Pridmore, this “is the visceral dread of the sea that characterises almost every reference to the sea in the Bible.” And, it should be added, in most of these references, Yahweh is shown as the master of the sea. Our Call to Worship this morning, a section of Psalm 107, is just one example. Some of the great poetry of the Hebrew Scriptures can be found in passages praising God’s reign over the chaos symbolized by the sea. Psalm 89:8-10 says, “<sup>8</sup>O LORD God of hosts, who is as mighty as you, O LORD? Your faithfulness surrounds you. <sup>9</sup>You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them. <sup>10</sup>You crushed the dragon of the sea like a carcass; you scattered your enemies with your mighty arm.” Job 26 contains his praise of God: “<sup>12</sup>By his power he stilled the Sea; by his Wisdom he struck down the sea dragon. <sup>13</sup>By his breath the heavens were made fair; his hand pierced the fleeing serpent.” That’s also, by the way, a nice bit of Trinitarian scripture, referencing God as Power, as Wisdom (the Greek *λογος*), and as breath, *ruach*, Spirit. But I digress, or maybe I’m just getting ahead of myself.

The Hebrew Scriptures also make good use of the sea and its underlying meaning as chaos to express the sense of the troubles that so often beset God’s people both communally and individually. Certainly our Call to Worship psalm could be understood in this metaphorical way. Psalm 69 opens with this heart-wrenching plea: “<sup>1</sup>Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. <sup>2</sup>I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me. <sup>3</sup>I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched. My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God.” The prophet Isaiah provides another lovely example, which, by the way, also sets up some interesting resonances with our Gospel text. Isaiah 51:9-11: “<sup>9</sup>Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the LORD! Awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago! Was it not you who cut the sea monster in pieces, who pierced the dragon? <sup>10</sup>Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep; who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to cross over? <sup>11</sup>So the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”

“Awake, awake, put on strength!” “Wake up, Jesus, wake up! Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?” At the point of crisis in our story, Jesus is pursuing a different aspect of the Psalmist’s wisdom: “In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for thou alone, O Lord, makest me dwell in safety.” He is apparently untroubled by the weather, worn out from a day of teaching, he is content to trust his and his companions’ safety to his Father, at least until they rouse him. The Gospel, I think, catches a very human Jesus, somewhat annoyed at having his rest interrupted.

His command to the sea and storm is abrupt: “Quiet down!” “Be still!” “Silence!” “Be muzzled!” are some of the translations. It is the same word that Mark says he used to silence the evil spirit possessing the man in the synagogue in Capernaum. His words to his disciples are no more gentle: “Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?” It reminds me of what I’m likely to say to my children if they rouse me from a nap – “You knuckleheads cut it out. Let me get some sleep for crying out loud.”

For all that Mark portrays a very human Jesus here, his story also points to a very profound understanding of Jesus’ divine nature. If, as we’ve seen in our quick overview of Hebrew Scripture, it is the place of God and God alone to control the seas, then a Jewish writer such as Mark almost assuredly was can only mean one thing telling a story like this. This man, Jesus, the carpenter and teacher from Nazareth, was also Emmanuel, God With Us. In his commentary on this passage, Jeffery John writes: “Because we are so used to these stories, we risk missing how totally extraordinary this fact is: that writers who were Jews, trained in the Law, raised in the most monotheistic of faiths, should believe that in Jesus Yahweh’s own power and authority had literally walked this earth in a human being.”

Extraordinary. No wonder the disciples reacted as they did. “They were terrified and asked each other, ‘Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!’” They may be more frightened by the sudden cessation of the storm and Jesus’ part in it than they were by the storm itself! To realize that one is in the Divine Presence, for all that it should be a joyful and love-filled experience, can also be disquieting, troubling, to say the least. Matthew Skinner, the Presbyterian pastor and professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, cites Dietrich Bonhoeffer on this passage. Skinner “suggest(s) that the tenderness of the Incarnation has left people unable to [in Bonhoeffer’s words] ‘feel the shiver of fear that God’s coming should arouse in us. We are indifferent to the message, taking only the pleasant and agreeable out of it and forgetting the serious aspect, that the God of the universe draws near to the people of our little earth and lays claim to us.’” Skinner continues, “When Christ quiets the forces that threaten chaos, makes the unclean clean, and restores the unacceptable to wholeness, these acts upend our cherished assumptions about order, security, autonomy, and fairness. When God comes so near, we cannot hide. Nor can we push God away.”

But there is more for us here than the assertion of Jesus’ divinity in the oldest Gospel (contrary to Dan Brown’s suggestion that such an idea wasn’t widely held until the time of Constantine) and the reminder that the Presence of God is not to be taken lightly. Let us return to the good Hebrew understanding of the storm as a metaphor for life’s troubles and the chaotic power of evil. Mark must surely have had such an application in mind when he wrote his gospel, for scholars believe that it was first set down for the young Church at the time of the great persecution under Nero. In that context, the story is a reminder that the power of God in Christ can protect us from all sorts of evils, both of the world’s making and of our own. This image of protecting, provident hand of God sheltering God’s people from the danger of a sea of troubles has rightly been a popular one in the history of the Church. The early Christians adopted a simple drawing of a boat with a cross for a mast as the symbol of the church, a symbol refined by my friends at Crescent Hill Baptist in Louisville as their logo, which is reproduced on the back of our bulletin today. If you are interested in church architecture, you may remember that the section of a cathedral or other traditional church buildings where the congregation sits is called

the nave, which is the Latin word for boat. It was a reminder to Christians that they were on a journey of faith together, protected from the chaos of the sea by God. We find the image in our hymnody, as well. When I was a boy in Southern Baptist churches and we would have a Sunday Night Hymn Sing, I would invariably request an old gospel hymn called “Love Lifted Me” – it was #222 in the 1957 Baptist Hymnal. It uses this metaphor of the sea as sin and trouble as its core image. The last verse is: “Souls in danger, look above, Jesus completely saves. He will lift you by his love out of the angry waves. He’s the master of the sea, billows his will obey. He your Savior wants to be; be saved today.” A more recent treatment of the idea, and one that we’ve sung here, was written by Grady Nutt and my former pastor, Paul Duke: “Not our choice the wind's direction, unforeseen the calm or gale. Thy great ocean swells before us, and our ship seems small and frail. Fierce and gleaming is Thy myst'ry drawing us to shores unknown; Plunge us on with hope and courage 'til Thy Harbor is our home!” Perhaps some of you know the old Irish Fisherman’s Prayer, “Dear Lord, be good to me. The sea is so wide, and my boat is so small.”

Miracles do happen. All of us know of them, some in our own lives. God does indeed protect us from danger. But not all of the storms in our lives are easily calmed. Some, it seems, last forever and leave untold damage. We cannot mention the metaphor of sea and storm without reflecting on the hurricanes that devastated the Gulf Coast last year, or the tsunami that caused such terrible loss of life around the Indian Ocean at the end of 2004. I have no answer, either glib or profound, for the presence of such pain in the world of a loving God. Perhaps I can do no better than to echo the desperate cry of a father with a sick child in a story later in Mark’s Gospel: “Lord, I believe. Help thou my unbelief!” But from the depths of my soul, I find agreement with something from the Jesuit writer, John Kavanaugh: “Our faith is not a guarantee that we will not go under. But it is a promise that, even if we nearly drown, Jesus will be with us. Not every storm of ours is miraculously silenced before his command, but all can be transformed by the abiding presence of love that disarms all fear.”

The apostle Paul understood the transformation that comes from resting in the love that disarms all fear. In today’s lectionary epistle, we find these words from his second letter to the Christians in Corinth: (II Cor. 6:3-10) “We do nothing that people might object to, so as to not bring discredit on our function as God’s servants. <sup>4</sup>Instead, we prove ourselves authentic servants of God; by great fortitude in times of hardships, difficulties and distress; <sup>5</sup>when we are flogged or sent to prison or mobbed; labouring, sleepless, starving. <sup>6</sup>We prove we are God’s servants by our purity, knowledge, patience, and kindness; in the Holy Spirit, in a love free of affectation; <sup>7</sup>by the word of truth and by the power of God; by using the weapons of righteousness for attack and for defence: <sup>8</sup>prepared for honour or disgrace, for blame or praise; taken for impostors and yet we are genuine; <sup>9</sup>unknown and yet we are acknowledged; said to be dying, and yet here we are, alive; rumored to be executed before we are sentenced; <sup>10</sup>thought most miserable yet we are always rejoicing; taken for paupers though we make many people rich; for people having nothing though we have everything.”

Bill O’Brien has written: “Paul knew that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, neither slumbers nor sleeps. It was not delivery from life's dangers that defined a miracle: it was the coping power, the power present in any life situation, that bore witness to the mighty power and presence of God.” My friends, we will experience

heartache, trouble, even tragedy in our lives. Christians are not immune from bad bosses, loss of jobs, homelessness, hunger, disease. We have pledged ourselves to one whose kingdom is not of this world and our rewards are not those that the world would choose. But we are promised the presence of Christ in all our days, no matter what our situation, and His presence can bring us peace and comfort and even joy, no matter what our situation. Paul understood that. When we stand, in a moment, and sing “Amazing Grace,” Paul would certainly be able to stand with us and sing “through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come.” And I hope that we will be able to sing with confidence, as Paul could, “Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far and grace shall lead me home.” Paul was not in that boat on the Sea of Galilee that evening. Indeed, when he was still called Saul, he did his best to sink the metaphorical boats of those who’d gone fishing for men with Jesus. But he learned to rely on the love and grace of the master of the sea, Christ Jesus, and so, even when he was in prison and facing execution, he was able to write to his friends in Philippi, “Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Amen.