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Job 38:1-11, Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32, Mark 4:35-41

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

³⁸And he was in the hinder part of the ship, asleep on a pillow: and they awake him, and say unto him, Master, carest thou not that we *perish*? (Mark 4:38, KJV)

The physics of a shipwreck are awesome. Well, some shipwrecks, I suppose, result from carelessness or drunkenness or poor maps, and these we can perhaps understand. But, then, there are some shipwrecks in which captain and crew do everything within their power and skill, but it is all for naught, because the physics just aren't right.

One of my Bible commentaries mentioned Sebastian Junger's book, *The Perfect Storm*, which relates the fates of a number of ships during the 1991 "storm of the century." Let me read the commentary passage to you:

One ship in particular, the fishing vessel *Andrea Gail*, illustrates the perils of the seas. The crew of the *Andrea Gail* entered the storm of the century the way you walk into a room; one minute all was calm with light and variable winds, the next minute the sea began to boil, churned up by winds of forty knots, gusting to ninety knots. In just one hour the barometric pressure dropped 996 millibars and the waves had kicked up to seventy feet!

There comes a point when physics takes over. If a boat heads into a wave that is higher than the boat is long, it will get pitchpoled / end to end / to its doom. Or if a wave that is higher than the boat is wide hits from the side, it will capsize. The *Andrea Gail*, though a large ship of seventy-two feet, eventually met waves even higher, and so pitchpoled to the bottom of the North Atlantic.¹

Apparently, the Sea of Galilee was capable of storms like this: sudden, fierce storms that could overmatch seasoned sailors. In fact, I read that even nowadays there are warning signs posted on the western side of the sea at the car parks where tourists sit and gaze out at the sea. The signs warn that if a storm should come up on the sea, then the cars should get out of there, for the waves are capable of toppling them too, though they imagine themselves safe on the land.²

The disciples in this morning's Gospel story are caught in such a storm. They know they are overmatched. They are fisherman, at least many of them are, and they carry the skills and experience of the generations with them. Their limbs and muscles

¹ *The Lectionary Commentary: The Third Readings: The Gospels*, (William B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2001) page 206.

² N.T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone*.

know how to move in a storm, they know how to efficiently push that oar and pull that line, and they know how to coordinate their movements as in a dance so that they do not hinder one another as they fight the storm. They know much about the sea, and what they know this time is that they are undone. And so they awaken Jesus and cry out their despair to him:

³⁸And he was in the hinder part of the ship, *asleep* on a pillow: and they awake him, and say unto him, Master, carest thou not that we perish? (Mark 4:38, KJV)

As far as I can remember, this is the only Bible story in which Jesus sleeps. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter, James, and John are supposed to stay awake, watch with Jesus, and pray with him in his time of spiritual agony, but they are unable to do so. They drift into sleep. But Jesus does not. Jesus prays on when others are sleeping.

More than once we read in the Gospels about Jesus heading off to a place apart, to pray in the nighttime. For example, in the Sixth Chapter of Luke, we find this note:

And it came to pass in those days, that he went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God. (Luke 6:12, KJV)

Some people are like that: they just do not seem to need much sleep. Especially young people seem able to study through the night, perhaps pray through the night, perhaps play through the night³.

I do not doubt that Jesus slept, for sleep is a human thing. Once when Jesus was admitting that he was a poor man, he mentioned that he had “no place to lay his head,”⁴ as if laying his head down in sleep was something that he naturally did too.

Still, it is only in this particular story that the text says that Jesus slept. He slept in the midst of that terrible storm. What an image of peace that is! Creation is in commotion, winds are howling, waves are crashing, there is hurly-burly all about, and yet Jesus sleeps. That sleep suggests faith. It expresses a calm conviction in Jesus that he can work through the day and then, like you and me, find some cushion, lay his head down, entrust his life to his heavenly Father, and drift off into sleep.

So, Jesus slept. But notice this: Jesus did not sleep in safety, apart from his disciples. He had not abandoned his disciples. He was with them. His saving presence was there, though the disciples *supposed* his presence to be unhelpful. They supposed that the presence of Jesus meant nothing, and that he would perish with them. Glad to say, they were wrong. After all, God sent the Son into the world not to condemn the world but that the world through him might have *life*. (John 3:17) And it makes all the

³ Let me say a word to those who do such things, who study or pray or perhaps play throughout some *Saturday* night: soon, if sleep should overcome you on a Sunday morning, you will be able to come to church nonetheless, thanks to our summertime Sunday evening Holy Communion services, starting July 12. See the colorful insert in this morning’s worship service about that.

⁴ Matthew 8:20

difference in the world that if we should “walk through the valley of the shadow of death, thou art *with me*”!(Psalm 23)

The presence of Jesus means *no perishing*. In the stories of Jesus, did ever a man, did ever a woman perish in his presence? I cannot recall such a thing. I do recall Jesus coming upon a young man who had died, thereby breaking the heart of his poor mother, who was a widow. But again I say, the presence of Jesus means *no perishing*. So, when Jesus saw the mother, “he had compassion on her and said unto her, “weep not.” Then he said to the dead man, “Young man, I say unto thee, Arise.”(Luke 7:12-15, KJV) Thus Jesus restored to his mother the lad who had perished. Even on the Cross Jesus was the first to die, for it could not be that someone should perish in his presence. Indeed, the whole point of his death and resurrection is that his presence shall be eternal, and when he comes on the scene, there shall be no perishing.

Later in St. Mark, we will read about Jesus walking on the sea (Mark 6:47-51). And surely he could do that -- he could have walked right away from the storm on the sea in this morning's story. But he had not done that. He had not walked away and abandoned his disciples in that boat. They were threatened, they were overmatched, but help was near. Indeed Help was within reach of their voices. Help was indeed within reach of their prayers. In due time, Jesus helped them, and my! What help! He calmly instructed the mighty wind and waves as if speaking to children: Hush! Be still. And so it was. All that terror and agitation was replaced by calm akin to the seventh day, when even our Maker rested from all his labors.

The story of the storm of the sea is Holy Week writ small. On the sea, wind and waves and great power buffet Jesus and the disciples. All falls apart. Human skill and talent have reached their limits. They are overmatched. Likewise, on the Cross, chaos reigns. People shout at Jesus, they mock him, they humiliate him, they crucify him, and his disciples are terrified. But, Good Friday eventually gives way to Easter morning. Likewise, in time the great storm on the sea in this morning's Bible reading breaks and blessed calm comes. The storm passes on the sea, and the resurrected Jesus tames even death itself.

I love this story of the storm on the sea for two reasons. First, it sometimes come our way that we occupy that little barque with the disciples. If Peter and James and John could look up for a moment from their rowing and hauling on ropes, they would notice *you and me* in that boat too, clinging to whatever handhold we had, for dear life's sake. That is, sometimes life works its way out that we feel that we have been caught up, not only in a storm, but in a perfect storm. If our troubles had come to us one at a time, with some reasonable pace between them, then maybe we could have handled them. But as things are, they are coming *too fast*, piling up on us. So, we suffer setbacks in health, finance, romance, and vocation all at once, a heart-breaking conglomeration of troubles. Too many blows! We are suffering too many blows at once, and things are feeling out of joint. We are being buffeted by a perfect storm.

So, that is one reason I like this story: It describes an immense amount of suffering that can come the way of a human, including a Christian human.

But the better reason I like this story is that for all the chaos, it is still the case that we belong to the One who is Master of even the wind and the waves. And because we belong to Him, one day we will again enjoy a season of peace. Soon, I hope. Very

soon, I pray. But that we shall enjoy calm on the sea again I fully believe, for Jesus is going to see to it.

Let me borrow some language from this morning's First Lesson, from Job Chapter 38, to help me express God's mastery over the sea and its storms. After thirty-seven chapters of Job protesting his innocence, in Chapter 38, the LORD begins his answer. One way to view the LORD's answer is not so much that he is rebuking Job, but rather reassuring him that though tears come in the nighttime, still the dawn breaks at last, and there is a limit to what we humans suffer.

To express this notion of limits to what sin, death, and the devil can do to us, the LORD speaks of the waves of the sea. The ancient Israelites were not really a sea-faring people. For them, the sea represented monsters and chaos and danger. And so the testimony of the Lord in Job 38 was very moving for Israel. The Lord questions Job with these words:

⁸Or who shut up the sea with doors, when it brake forth, as if it had issued out of the womb? ⁹When I made the cloud the garment thereof, and thick darkness a swaddlingband for it, ¹⁰And brake up for it my decreed place, and set bars and doors, ¹¹And said, Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further: and here shall thy proud waves be stayed? (Job 38:8-11, KJV)

When Jesus was nailed to the cross, he suffered the terrible storm of death. But on the third day God said to death, "you can go this far but no farther." And so death had to release Jesus and let him go. In this way, by his resurrection, Jesus shows that death's power has a limit. God has put a boundary around death which it cannot overstep, for God is far more powerful than death. Indeed, the boundaries of our suffering and disappointments shall give way to the very Kingdom of God, where all tears will be wiped away and replaced by fullness of life we can hardly imagine now, and by a "joy unspeakable and full of glory." (1 Peter 1:8)

Meanwhile, we should continue to do what seasoned sailors do. We should set our sails, pull on our oars, exercise our skills, and above all, we should stay in the boat! Stay in the boat, as you are doing even now, for you are in the church, in the very presence of your Saviour Jesus Christ. Stay in the boat, practice your love continually, even through the storm, knowing that your efforts are going in the right direction - aye in the direction of the One who will save us even when we have reached the end of our own strength. I mean Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.