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1 Kings 19:9-18, Matthew 14:22-33

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

When evening came, he was there alone,<sup>24</sup> but the boat by this time was many furlongs distant from the land, beaten by the waves; for the wind was against them. (Matthew 14:23-24, RSV)

In our English translations, this story is perhaps too mildly told. There are tones and overtones to the underlying Greek that make the tale more dramatic than the fairly calm English versions we are used to. For example, in the verse I have just quoted, we read that the boat was far from land and was “beaten” by the waves. That is the *Revised Standard Version* translation. The *King James Version* uses an even more mild word, “tossed”:

But the ship was now in the midst of the sea, tossed with waves:

But more than that was afoot. The Greek word translated as “beaten” or “tossed” carries a tone of hostility with it. One commentator describes the scene using the word “tortured”:

Essential to the story in Matthew’s telling of it is the fact that at the time of Jesus’ appearance on the lake the boat was far from land and being *tortured* by the waves.<sup>1</sup> (emphasis in text)

And this seems to be right based on the meanings of the underlying word. The Greek word *basanizo* means to torture, to vex, to torment, or harass. This boat wasn’t simply tossed by the waves. It was assaulted by them!

Likewise, at the end of the story, we read that when Jesus and Peter got into the boat, “the wind ceased.” But again, this is perhaps an overly calm way of describing things. The underlying Greek carries with it the tone of “exhaustion.” Another commentator puts it this way:

When Jesus and Peter got into the boat, the wind ceased from weariness. The language personifies the wind as though it had engaged in a fierce struggle with the Son of God and then gave up.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas R.A. Hare, *Matthew*, Interpretation Series (John Knox Press: Louisville, 1993) page 169.

<sup>2</sup> Roger E. Van Harn in *The Lectionary Commentary: The Gospels* (William B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI, 2001) page 90.

Again, this seems to be right, for the Greek verb here, *kopazo*, includes the idea of growing weary or tired. This boat, and the disciples within it, had been attacked by fierce forces, which had to yield in the end before the Master of the Sea.

## OUR WORLD IS WILD

I am drawn to these more dramatic ways of the telling the tale because your world is sometimes wild, my world is sometimes wild. It is not merely that we feel tossed around by random, indifferent forces. Rather, sometimes things just are going so wrong that it feels almost spooky, as if we face malevolence and an accumulation of blows. Indeed, sometimes storms so rock us that we are put in mind of St. Paul's words about "principalities and powers":

For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. (Ephesians 6:12, KJV)

Go to most any hospital, for example, and you will find people who find themselves in a wild world. They listen as best they can to the words of the physician, but they can hardly take them in -- at least at first. The diagnosis concerns *them*, yet the words seem somehow too strange, too large for them. They just know that something is afoot, trouble is brewing, but they find it hard to be comforted or even instructed by all the medical words. They feel buffeted, like wind-blown sailors on the sea.

Or look into the heart of that fool Herod, the one entranced by the dancing girl, and you might well find mysterious longings buffeting the man and depriving him of peace and good sense. He knows he ought not to so recklessly promise things to the girl:

<sup>6</sup>But when Herod's birthday was kept, the daughter of Herodias danced before them, and pleased Herod. <sup>7</sup>Whereupon he promised with an oath to give her *whatsoever* she would ask. (Matthew 14:6-7, KJV)

He knew that he was a king, with a king's responsibilities, and that he *ought not* to indulge the dancing girl, yet such was the tornado of longings within him that he could hardly stop himself. And then he knows that he ought not to yield to her cruel demand for the beheading of John the Baptist, yet events have so conspired that he feels himself swept away. He feels compelled to do what in his good mind he would not do. His world has become wild.

And then, think of grief and its strange ways. A loved one has died. We have heard about what the psychologists call "stages of grief." We figure that we have worked our way through them. We figure that enough time has passed. And yet suddenly our heart is heavy again and our strength seems to evaporate.

Or look at your retirement account or investments in this fragile economic world, or worse, think of those who have no retirement account or no job, and your might find yourself feeling akin to those tempest-tossed disciples in their boat in the midst of the sea with Jesus off yonder, up on his mountain lost in prayer while you are in the boat in an angry sea.

## **GIVE THEM CREDIT**

Let's give those disciples credit. Our text says that the wind was against them, or, as the *King James Version* puts it, "the wind was contrary." But there is no word that the disciples are frightened by the wind. They are fishermen. They have known wind and waves before. It is the wee hours - the "fourth watch of the night" being between 3 a.m. and 6 a.m.<sup>3</sup> - and there they are battling the wind and the waves, trying to save their boat as good fisherman do. No, the thing that unnerved them was not the wind and the waves, but the ghost! As if it wasn't enough for them to be worn out by their seafaring struggles throughout the night, now they see a ghost off yonder walking on the water. That is the last straw. They are at their wits end. Our text puts it this way:

<sup>26</sup>But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were *terrified*, saying, "It is a ghost!" (Matthew 14:26, RSV)

They do not recognize Jesus walking on the water. They last they knew, Jesus was off by himself praying on a mountain. Now, they face a combination of natural and supernatural forces that seem too much for them. It is one thing to battle wind and wave, but it is just too much to also have to battle a ghost. It seems too much to have to contend with the everyday troubles of life and then devilish principalities and powers as well.

## **LIVING BY SOUND, NOT BE SIGHT**

Judging by what the eye can see, the disciples are overmatched. They face both storm and ghost, and it leaves them terrified.

Here is where our First Lesson ties into our Gospel Lesson. Through a kind of genius, the lectionary matches the story of Jesus walking on the water with the story of the prophet Elijah and the "still small voice":

And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake;<sup>12</sup> and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice.

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<sup>3</sup> Hare, Matthew, page 168.

The eye naturally goes toward the earthquake, the hurricane, and the fire. But do not forget the “still small voice.” Especially if that still small voice emerges from the midst of the storm and speaks of peace:

<sup>27</sup>But immediately [Jesus] spoke to them, saying, “Take heart, it is I; have no fear.” (Matthew 14:27, RSV)

## **DANGERS WITHOUT AND DOUBTS WITHIN**

As you soon get up from your pew and come to the Blessed Sacrament, you are the one who knows best the storms that might be buffeting you. You are the one with the truest insight to your dangers without and your doubts within. Whatever the storms are, it is naturally that they should occupy your mind and your heart.

Only do not let them overwhelm the still small voice of the Master of the Sea who is glad to speak with you: “This is my body. This is my blood.” Compared to the woes and the troubles you might face, these are mild words. But they are mild words that have a wild world of suffering and faithfulness behind them, for they are the words of our Saviour Jesus Christ. And they are mild words that shall grow in magnitude and majesty till they yield the very Kingdom of God itself and guide you safely there, into that kingdom.

We have on our side Someone who has suffered the wildest of storms and triumphed over them. He faced hunger and thirst and poverty and disloyalty and all the ordinary disappointments of life. He also faced the strong and determined opposition of the devil and all his forces. This combination of natural and supernatural forces reached their pinnacle on Good Friday, with disciples, priesthood, and government all turning away from him, and with crucifixion’s storms of pain and weariness and fear breaking upon him. What we might suffer, he has suffered. The depths of disappointment and pain we might reach, he has also reached. Yet he has triumphed over all and lives now to be your friend, Saviour, and guide.

I hope this is a good time in your life, filled with happiness and optimism. But if it is not, be not entirely undone by your present troubles, for the Word of God might be small and mild for now, but it will work itself out unto your eternal salvation. Be true to Christ in this troubled time, and he will prove your Good Shepherd now and in ages to come. To this Good Shepherd, to this Master of the Wind and Wave, and to this Still, Small Voice of the Gospel be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.