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

From time to time I jot down titles for my sermons. This is one of those times. I call this sermon “Storms on the Sea and in the Soul.” My opening text is from our Gospel Lesson, from Mark 4. It speaks of the dismay of the disciples at the storm on the sea:

37And a great storm of wind arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. 38But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care if we perish?” (Mark 4:37-38, RSV)

There is something about a storm that can humble even a modern, scientific person. Perhaps you remember Hurricane Irene, back in 2011. In late August of that year, it buffeted our town. In fact, it seemed best to Thomas Wicks and me back then that we should cancel the Sunday service on August 28 and encourage people to remain safe and sound at home. So, that is what we did. We urged people to stay home on Sunday and we relocated that liturgy to Wednesday evening, a few days later. We had pretty good attendance that Wednesday evening—35 people according to my records.

But who ever heard of church doors being closed on a Sunday morning? I could hardly bear the thought. So I ventured out on Sunday morning and made my way to our church. So did some other members of our church. I was determined that if at all possible, if people should come to church in the midst of the storm, we should be here, ready to worship. And so we did. Our small congregation held worship here at Immanuel Lutheran Church on Sunday of that frightening summer storm.

I still remember the sense of awe I felt as I walked along the sidewalk toward church that morning. I had read the weather forecasts. It seemed to me that the winds would be manageable. I figured that I could safely make it to the church. But the sidewalks and streets were quite empty. Most folks were safe and sound inside their apartments. At no point along my walk was I actually swept away by the winds, and yet I remember the sense that a storm can be a majestic thing, far beyond our ability to handle. There was a sense of power in the winds — a sense that if Hurricane Irene wanted to, she could simply flick a finger and send me flying off into space.
So imagine the fear of our Lord’s disciples when that “great storm of wind arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already filling.” Peter and Andrew, James and John were fishermen. They knew how to handle themselves in a storm. At least, they knew how to handle themselves in a manageable storm. But this storm in our Gospel lesson for today seems not to have been a manageable storm. Rather it was the kind of storm that could strike fear even into the hearts of seasoned sailors. Perhaps it was precisely because the disciples knew the ways of the sea that they were so dismayed by this particular storm. They knew enough to realize that they had met their match and that, unless Jesus saved them, they were going to be lost. And so these hardy men cried out to their Lord:

“Teacher, do you not care if we perish?” (Mark 4:38, RSV)

Perishing was precisely the issue. If Jesus does not save them, there is none to help and they are lost. Glad to say, Jesus did care and he did save them. The Bible’s way of putting it thrills me to think about:

39And he awoke and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea,  
“Peace! Be still!” And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. (Mark 4:39, RSV)

So it is that the Master of the sea heard the despairing cry of his disciples and saved them. It is a visible and dramatic illustration of why Jesus came to earth in the first place: he came that none should perish! It is as that dear verse John 3:16 puts it:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16, RSV)

Forget perishing! Our Lord’s goal is higher than that. Jesus does not want simply that we should not perish, but that we should “have eternal life.” And that is a happy thing to think about.

So far I have been talking about storms on the sea and on the land. Such storms are serious things and worth praying about.

It so happened that the next year after Hurricane Irene, New York City was buffeted by another big storm: Hurricane Sandy. The timing of Hurricane Sandy was such that it did not threaten our Sunday worship, which happened to be Reformation Sunday, October 28, 2012. We held worship that day, but we knew the storm was on its way, maybe a few days down the road. So I put a note in the worship folder that Sunday about the storm. That note pretty
much expresses how I still feel about storms on the sea and on the land. The note went this way:

Dear People of Immanuel Lutheran Church,

I read that this upcoming storm, Sandy, represents such an unusual combination of circumstances that it is likely to be studied by meteorologists for years to come. I consider this a matter worth praying about, and I have been doing so. Our Lord runs his creation according to certain regularities, including storm patterns, but we are always free to ask him to depart from those regularities, and I have asked him to do that this time. I have asked him to push the storm out to sea and spare our land. That is this man’s opinion and I have shared it with the Master of Wind and Wave. I must leave the matter to his judgment, but I invite you to join me and others in praying about this storm.

I believe that God still does wonders! I believe that the God who is the Master of wind and wave can perfectly well shove a storm along so that it does no damage. So pray for that! Leave it up to the Lord to manage things according to his wisdom, but pray that the storm should pass. Pray that the Lord should say to the storm:

Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stayed!
(from this Sunday’s reading from Job 38:11, RSV)

Pray that Jesus will once again say to the storm:

“Peace! Be still!” (Mark 4:39, RSV)

So that the wind should cease, and there should be a great calm.

So much, then, for storms on the sea. Now let us speak of storms in the soul.

It seems to me that the great imagery of today’s Psalm 117 can also apply to our hearts and to the storms in the soul that come our way. The Psalm speaks of merchants caught in a storm on the sea, of how frightened they are, and how the LORD rescued them. The passage goes this way:

23 Some went down to the sea in ships and plied their trade in deep waters;  
24 they beheld the works of the LORD
and his wonders in the deep.

25 Then he spoke, and a stormy wind arose, which tossed high the waves of the sea.

26 They mounted up to the heavens and fell back to the depths; their hearts melted because of their peril.

27 They reeled and staggered like drunkards and were at their wits’ end.

28 Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress.

29 He stilled the storm to a whisper and quieted the waves of the sea.

30 Then were they glad because of the calm, and he brought them to the harbor they were bound for. (Psalm 117:23-30, LBW)

When seasons of trouble come upon us, they can do this to us: they can make us reel and stagger like drunkards. They can leave us at our wits end.

The times that try men’s souls, that try women’s soul, can be individual or societal. We can be tossed high and low, like a ship in stormy waves, either because of some trouble that comes upon us personally, or because we are part of a community, even a land, that is troubled, and we suffer along with everyone else. A word about both kinds of trying times:

A hard season in life can come upon us individually, perhaps like a bolt from the blue, or perhaps because of a long stretch of stress that is leaving us exhausted. The diagnosis comes. It is cancer. Even in this day of wonderful medicine, the news of cancer can knock us for a loop. Or suddenly we lose a loved one, and we are left in grief. We wander around like drunkards onboard a ship in a storm. We reel and stagger and our wits become dull, we are so sad or so frightened. Or perhaps it is no sudden trouble, but rather the accumulation of years of financial stress or some other kind of stress—stress that we could handle back when we were young and strong, but which now is starting to feel unmanageable. We are close to exhausted. These are the times that try our soul. These are the wild storms in the soul that disrupt our balance and our peace. These are the hard times that come upon us as individuals. They are blows that strike us, but not necessarily our neighbors.

And then there are the storms that are so big they seem to swamp the whole land, like hurricane Sandy swamping the whole East Coast. We are part of our society, and so we are vulnerable to what is going on in this society. I know that each generation is tempted to look back on its past through rosy lenses, and I cannot blame you young folks in our congregation if you think us older ones are complaining and crotchety and always overlooking the good in the present age. God bless you for reminding us of that good. And yet I cannot help but think that something has happened to America over the course of my
lifetime. Of course, there is the decline of faith and of love of the Bible. This is something that, as a pastor, I note and worry about. But there are other declines too—declines about which I have no special insight, but which I worry are hurting you young ones too. In large terms, I worry about what has become of what can be called “the common good” in our land.

I have a historic photo in my office of Lexington Avenue in 1931. You can see our church in this photo. You can see people on the sidewalks around our church. The thing that strikes me most about this photo is that the people on the sidewalks are dressed up so beautifully. Everybody seems to be wearing a coat and tie and overcoat. The ladies are wearing hats and long dresses and wool coats. It reminds me of my boyhood when people tended to dress up some when we went to town. There was a kind of instinct back then that common space is sacred space, because it has people in it, and the Bible taught us to love and honor people. Being in the public was not a time to do as you please, as if your neighbors do not even exist. There was an abiding courtesy back then. Parents and grandparents taught it to the children. When you are out in public, do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Hold the door open for others. Surrender your seat to pregnant ladies or old folks. Do not be too loud. Try to preserve some peace and quiet, so that people can follow their own thoughts and pray their own prayers.

So I worry about what is happening to our feel for common space. But even more I worry about what is happening to our feel for our fellow human beings—for the common good in our land. Something happened to American business, for example, along the way. If I am not mistaken, it used to be that the CEO was a kind of statesman of the land, balancing as best he could the welfare of all people with a stake in the business—not only the stockholders, but also the workers and the communities and the quality and price of the product so that people could afford good products and medicines. Of course there were business people who broke the rules about the common good and exploited the system, thereby placing pressure on other CEOs to do the same, lest they be fired. But at first, back in the old days, it was not taken to be a virtue to disregard the common good. It was not taken to be a duty to maximize value for stockholders to the neglect of all else, including the welfare of the workers. People can become rich by setting aside concern for others, but then, what is happening to the common good in our land.

Likewise, there used to be statesmen and women in politics. Even if you disagreed with them, you knew that they were trying to make America a better place—America, not just some tiny part of it, but America! They showed respect for people on the other side of the aisle, because they believed that we were all in this together, all trying to make things better for the people, for the common good.

If concern for the common good is in decline, that means that a lot of poor and vulnerable and working class people are going to be in for some trouble.
They are caught up in a storm. It is a collective storm, tossing many, many people in America here and yon.

Nearly anybody in this congregation is smarter about these things than I am. I simply want to say, when we are in a storm, either an individual storm or a societal one, let us not forget the Master of Wind and Wave. In their despair, the disciples cried out to Jesus,

\[
\text{Master, carest thou not that we perish? (Mark 4:38, KJV)}
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Well, he does care. So wake him up! If Jesus should be asleep on the cushion in the hinder part of the boat, cry to him and wake him up! Match the storm on the sea or the storm in your soul with a storm of prayers rising up to heaven. Do not underestimate the power of your prayers to the One who would rather die himself than see you perish.

As for the common good in our land, it has to begin somewhere. Let it begin with you. Let it continue with you. Do not become weary in worry about everyone in our land. You are Christians. You are followers of Jesus Christ. You are the ones who know that our neighbors are precious—every one of them. As far as lies possible with us, let us renew the fight to love others as we have been loved, even loved by Jesus Christ, the Master of Wind and Wave, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.