

Mark Twain was in the Holy Land with his wife. They spent a night at a resort on the Sea of Galilee. It was particularly beautiful – a full moon over the sea made for an especially romantic setting. So the Twains decided that they wanted to go on a moonlit ride on the lake. Twain approached one of the local fishermen and asked him how much he would charge to take them out in a boat. The man looked at Twain – observed his fine white suit, dapper hat, shirt, and shoes – and supposed him to be a rich man. “For you, my friend – only \$25!” the fisherman replied. This was back when \$25 was a TON of money. Twain knew it was certainly way too much for a boat ride. He turned to walk away, grumbling “I always wondered why Jesus walked on the water. Now I know!” (DYNAMIC PREACHING, 13 August 2017, p. 36)

First, a little gospel background. We need to remember that Matthew’s Gospel tells us who Jesus really is at the very first part of his Gospel. We are told in the first chapter that Jesus’ name is EMMANUEL, which means “God with us” (1:23). We have been working through this Gospel since Advent last December, and in a sense, we need to see it as an account of just HOW God is with us in Jesus Christ. Today’s text is an important piece of this understanding.

Jesus comes to His disciples in a storm that is threateningly dark and dangerous. Darkness and water are the forces that God pushed back when the earth was created in Genesis 1. So whenever the sky clouds over and it’s dark and stormy, it’s as if creation is being threatened, as if God’s reign over the world is being contested. The other reality is that by this time in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus had done a number of healings. But the ancients thought that humans could be healers, but only the gods could control the cosmos. In this story, Matthew tells us that Jesus is like God, who alone can control the cosmic forces of wind and waves. Jesus, like God, is in charge, even when it may initially appear to be otherwise. There is also a subtle reference here to another rescue that God makes in the Book of Exodus. Matthew says “During the fourth watch of the night, Jesus came to the disciples.” In Exodus, in the story of the crossing of the Red Sea, the biblical author says “In the night watch, just before dawn, the Lord cast through the fiery cloud upon the Egyptian force a glance that threw it into a panic.....the Lord was fighting for the Israelites against the Egyptians.” (Ex 14:24-25) That’s the fourth watch – the night watch. None of this is accidental. Remember that Matthew is writing for a Jewish audience that knew that story of the Red Sea by heart. (this first point freely adapted from Will Willimon in PULPIT RESOURCE, July-Sept 2017, p. 21) God had rescued His people in the fourth watch, and now Christ-who-is-God-with-us was doing the same.

OK, so what does this story about the first pope almost drowning in 1st century Galilee have to do with us? Well, I believe it gives expression to an experience that happens to us repeatedly in this life. WE ALL END UP IN A STORM. We all end up dealing with the messiness of life. And what do we do then? How do we get through? What – or better – WHO – can guide us through? This gospel reminds us that it is the Christ, God-with-us. The One who IS God, the One who rules the chaos of Genesis and the chaos that comes into every human life. But we often fail to recognize Christ’s presence in the midst of the storms of life.

The storm comes up, the disciples are terrified, and He comes to them on the water. Are they happy to see Him? NO! They are terrified – “It’s a ghost!” they cry. It took the disciples a long time to ‘get’ who Jesus fully was. It usually takes us a long time as well. Many see Jesus as a great teacher, moral advisor, a great human figure. But the invitation is to discover Him as much more. That night the disciples discovered that Jesus was considerably more. The story begins in terror and ends in joyful worship and recognition: “Then those in the boat worshipped Jesus and said, ‘You must be God’s Son!’”

Third, Ronald Rolheiser tells the story of attending a seminar on religious experience where a woman shared this story: A few years before this incident occurred, her life had been rather settled. She had been happily married, her children were grown and on their own, and she and her husband were running a successful business together. Then it all fell apart. Her husband, a recovering alcoholic, began to drink again. Within 2 years, they had lost everything, including each other. Their business went bankrupt, they lost their house, and their marriage fell apart. She moved to a new city and took a new job, the pain of what she had lost lingered, and she found herself constantly depressed and joyless as she sought to sink new roots, meet new people, and begin life all over in mid-life.

Her frustration culminated one evening when, having worked late, she was driving home and stopped for a red light. While waiting for the light to change, she was hit from behind by a drunk driver (the irony was not lost on her). Her car was badly damaged and she, suffering from whiplash and a series of cuts and bruises, was taken to a hospital by ambulance. After several hours of x-rays, examinations, and medical treatment, near midnight, she was released, to be driven home by a policeman. As they drove up to her townhouse she noticed that the front door was wide open. Getting out of the car she realized that her home had been ransacked and burglarized. It was the last straw. All that penned up frustration, anger, loss, and grief finally burst, she lost control, began to scream hysterically, and ran across the lawn shouting curses at God and life in general – with the policeman chasing after her.

As she recalled this, she told us that she remembered exactly what was going through her mind as she ran across that lawn at midnight, hysterical, cursing, a policeman giving chase. Her anger and her questions were about God: “Where is God in all of this? Why is God letting this happen? Why is God asleep?” Then, just as she heard her own curses, there was an answer, and suddenly, in one instant, everything became calm. She ceased running, stopped shouting, because she felt inside of herself a flood of calm and a peace such as she had never experienced in her life before. No magic lights went on, no divine voices were heard, and she made no claims of ‘miracle,’ but, for one second she realized that, no matter the storm, no matter the loss, and no matter death itself, God is still in charge of this universe. One second of realization was all it took. Calm returned. She sent the policeman home and began cleaning up her house. She has essentially remained in that calm since, she explained.

All three of the Synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – tell this story, but with slightly different variations. Mark and Luke both have Jesus IN the boat with the disciples, sound asleep on a cushion as the boat is nearly swamped. They wake Him, He rebukes the wind and sea, and they ask the question: “Who is this – that even the wind and the sea obey Him?”

The parallels of the stories are clear. The deeper lessons contained within them though are perhaps less obvious, at least during the more stormy moments of our own lives. In essence, both stories tell us that God is still in charge of this universe, every counter-indication notwithstanding. The first Christian creeds had only one line: “Jesus is Lord! Ultimately that says enough, says it all. God still rules, even in death and darkness. But, as these stories also make clear, during the stormy moments of life, when our very souls are in fear of drowning, it often seems like God is asleep, comfortable, His head on a cushion, or nowhere in sight. But, and this is the real challenge of these stories, calm is only a second of realization away. What calms the storm in life is not that all of our problems suddenly disappear, but that, within them, we realize that, because God is still in charge, all will be well – whiplash, bruises, ransacked houses, alcoholic spouses, lost houses, lost marriages, lost jobs, failure at school, not making the team, not getting into our preferred college, loneliness, and the shadow of death notwithstanding. All will be well because, even asleep with His head on a cushion, or

nowhere to be seen in the storm, God is still and forever Emmanuel – God with us – Lord of our lives – and Lord of His world. Amen. (adapted from Rolheiser, daily posting of 2/1/2017)

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