

Pentecost 5 - June 23, 2024

## Master of the Winds and the Waves

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I would like to begin by sharing some lyrics from a song written by James Cleveland.

The winds and the waves  
Shall obey my will, peace be still.  
Whether the wrath of the storm-tossed sea  
Or demons, or men, or whatever it be.  
No water can swallow the ship where lies  
The Master of ocean and earth and skies;  
They shall sweetly obey my will,  
Peace be still, peace be still.  
They all shall sweetly obey my will;  
Peace, peace be still.

For most, the sea conjures up delightful images. Some enjoy the serenity of a quiet walk on the shore or a cruise to a tropical island. Modern images of the sea are typically tame and inviting, lulling us into associating the sea with a sense of tranquility. The sea can be described in an endless number of ways. It is refreshing, beautiful, and humbling.

Not so for Mark.

Mark's sea is not a place for romantic cruises on crystal blue waters. According to theologian Sharyn Dowd, the waters are demon-filled and threaten to leave widows behind whenever their loved ones set sail in pursuit of their livelihood. Mark's sea is where discipleship is challenged, where boundaries are impassable, where life hangs in the balance, and where evil lurks as a formidable foe.

Storms happen – even to the best, the smartest and the most prepared among us. Storms terrify us, knocking us around, threatening to destroy our stability and security. We don't know whether we can withstand them, and we are uncertain of how long they will last. At least, that's how a storm at sea would be for most of us.

That is how it was for the disciples. At the end of a long day of teaching, Jesus needs a break and initiates a trip across the Sea of Galilee. Although the water is usually calm, the wind coming over the surrounding mountains can suddenly raise a tumultuous storm. Even with Jesus on board, they still encountered tremendous gusts. There was no avoiding this storm. Even as they faithfully followed Jesus' instructions to cross the water to the other side, they were beaten by waves. Even though surrounded by other boats – the wind howled – lightning flashed – rain poured – thunder boomed, and the boat seemed to be sinking. The disciples were terrified that they would perish and Jesus was asleep – on a cushion no less! So, they cry out, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”

It is then that Jesus calmed the sea with the words, “Peace, be still.” An image captured so well in the lyrics of the song written by James Cleveland.

We may have never crossed the Sea of Galilee, but we've been in that boat. This story is not just a story about a boat trip and stormy weather. It's a story about life – our life – our fear – our faith.

Times of intense difficulty, trouble, or danger have often been compared to stormy seas. They come upon us whether we like it or not. Life is like that. We can avoid some storms by watching the weather forecast and using some common sense. We can avoid some emotional, spiritual, financial, and social disasters by being wise and following God's instructions. But sometimes, bad things just happen – even while we're minding our own business, doing what's right, living out our Baptismal Covenant to the best of our ability, with God's help.

Sometimes, life places us in a boat and the storms begin to rage – the storms of pain and loss - the storms of rejection and failure – the storms of illness and death – the storms of pandemic and polar vortex – storms brought on by racial and political unrest. Whenever or however they arise, storms are about changing conditions. Life becomes overwhelming and out of control. The waves crash, the boat fills up, and we're struggling to stay afloat.

For several years, the storm of the pandemic took us to uncharted waters. We had a desired destination but were not sure of where we would end up or when we would get there. The water was deep, and the new shore seemed a distant horizon. Many of us cried out in fear, "God, where are you? Do you not care that we are suffering?"

When the wind ceased and the waves became calm, Jesus questioned the disciples' fear and lack of faith. It is worth noting that Jesus never said, "There's nothing to be afraid of." The storm on the Sea of Galilee that night must have been extremely fearsome if seasoned fishermen doubted their own ability to keep the boat afloat. We often confuse the two phrases, but saying, "There's nothing to be afraid of," is quite different from saying, "Do not be afraid." The truth is that things that cause fear are very real. Isolation, pain, viruses, the loss of one's job, or loss of a relationship, illness, and death are real.

Like the disciples in our text, we are also challenged to rediscover our faith in God's word when we find ourselves in the midst of storms. The questions Jesus asked the disciples are the questions he continues to ask us: "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

As we grow in faith, we come to understand that the things that cause us despair do not have the last word. Yet, faith does not eliminate, change, or take us around the storms of our lives. Rather, faith takes us through the storms, reminding us that Jesus is there with us. We are reminded that the power of God is mightier than any wind that beats against us – that the love of God is deeper than any wave that threatens to drown us. Jesus invites us to stay with him in the boat saying, “Let us go across to the other side, I won’t leave your side, I’ll journey with you.”

And let’s not forget that Jesus was not addressing only one disciple when he invited them on their boat trip. He addressed all twelve, and Mark tells us that other boats were with him. They were in community. If the pandemic has taught us anything, it is the importance of community. People worked so hard to stay connected to their communities, even while apart.

Just as the disciples set off for the other shore with Jesus in the stern, we too, journey with our community, accompanied by the Master of ocean and earth and skies, who promises, “The winds and the waves shall obey my will, peace be still.”

After the last winds died down from Hurricane Katrina, there was little optimism among those who remained in New Orleans and could venture out to see what had happened to their city. But in the heart of the French Quarter, in the courtyard behind St. Louis Cathedral, they found a sign of hope: A statue of Jesus, standing with outstretched arms on a white marble pedestal, still stood amid the rubble, unscathed by the destruction all around. A giant magnolia tree had fallen a few feet away; so had an ancient oak. Several burial vaults lay broken and smashed. But there stood the risen Christ with outstretched arms, offering peace and calm.

Friends, when the storms of life toss us to and fro, may we be reminded that the Master of the winds and the waves is present in every storm and his response is always the same: “Peace! Be still!” Amen.