

March 8th 2020 – St Andrew's [Lent II]

Sermon – “Eye of the Storm”

For a bunch of fishermen,
accustomed to being out on the water,
presumably in all kinds of weather,
the disciples sure do panic over stormy weather!
The only calm one in all those storms-at-sea situations
was the land-lubber carpenter from Nazareth.
Jesus lies asleep on a cushion,
undisturbed by the wind and the waves,
while the disciples get in a flap;
rushing to and fro, I imagine,
trimming sails
and bailing out the boat...
...imagining, perhaps,
that human effort could prove the equal or better of nature.

Helpless and afraid,
they turn to find Jesus sleeping in the stern,
somehow insufficiently bothered by this storm
to even be awakened by it!
They wake him, not for help or advice,
but to lash out:
“Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”
With just a few words, Jesus,
who had been happily sleeping
through the tossing waves and howling winds,
calms the storm with ease.

And that was when the real terror of the night began.
In the aftermath, in a sudden calm
that must have seemed eerie
after the violence of the storm,
the disciples looked at Jesus,
and were “filled with a great awe.”

That particular phrase from our Bibles this morning
is actually a softened version of the original Greek language gospel.
Claiming that what the disciples felt was “great awe”
is perhaps not quite correct.
A less poetic translation reads that the disciples
“feared a great fear.”

That sounds to me like
 a child's hide-under-the-bed response to a thunderstorm,
 rather than the more restrained and mature
 "great awe."

Fearing a great fear
 – that sounds like terror to me.

And so the only time in this story
 when the disciples are described as terrified
 is not when the waves were tossing them around,
 when the wind was howling,
 when the boat was filling with water,
 but after Jesus rebukes the both wind and them.

The terror comes not when they are shaking Jesus awake
 to ask if he cares whether or not they live or die,
 but only when they are asking each other,
 "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

Are we surprised that the disciples were more frightened by Jesus
 than by the storm?

After such an incredible display of power,
 it could have gone either way, really.

But they knew Jesus,
 knew what he was like,
 even if they were still a little fuzzy
 about who, exactly, he was.

Maybe wonder would be a more appropriate response.

But we are not told that they asked their question with
 joy or admiration or anticipation.

We are not told that they asked,
 "who is this"

with excitement rising in their voices.

Jesus' question to the disciples cuts to the heart of the issue:

"Have you still no faith?"

Their response to this demonstration
 of Jesus' divine power and kingship
 suggests that the answer to that question may be
 "no," or at least, "not yet."

Fear is something that each of us experiences at some point in our lives.

I'm not talking about sensible fears,
 like being afraid of burning your hand on a hot oven,
 or of being hit by a car if you walk into a busy street.

Some fear is reasonable and actually helps us stay safe.

I'm talking about the kind of fear
that makes us feel trapped and paralysed,
that causes us to lash out, at one another,
even at God.

We experience this kind of unhealthy fear
in our own lives as individuals and families,
as congregations and churches,
and also as concerned citizens
of Canada and the world.

We are afraid of the "wind and waves"
that batter and rock our own fragile vessels:
our lives, our churches, our countries.

We fear disapproval, rejection,
illness, pandemic,
disability, financial insecurity,
failure, and violence,
for ourselves and those we love.

We also fear the death of the churches
and the cultural values and traditions we believe in
and in which we have invested ourselves.

This kind of fear is pervasive,
it slips in everywhere
– into our culture, our churches,
our homes, and our hearts and minds.
How do we respond to those fears?
Do we confront them?
Or do we get lost,
swamped and drowning, in them?

In this story, fear is confronted,
but not by a sudden burst of courage or resolve
on the part of the disciples.
They do not pull themselves together
and take action despite their fear;
they do not discover inner resources
or strength that they didn't know they had,
at least not on their own.
They did not rise to the challenge of the storm
and best it
through their own iron backbones and nerves of steel.
It's Jesus who calms both them

and the storm
with the power of his presence.

So, for us today, the challenge of this story
is to not to find some forgotten courage deep in ourselves
for when our lives turn stormy,
and to not be too hard on ourselves
when we do get scared.
Instead, this story invites us
to turn always and again to Jesus
and remember that we are not alone in the boat,
that the one whom we trust
to be more powerful than all the storms in our lives,
is right there in the boat alongside us.

If the landlubber in the boat was anyone but Jesus,
it could be argued that he didn't understand the danger they were in
as well as the more experienced ex-fishermen.

That storm on the Sea of Galilee
was very likely quite frightening;
it's a shallow lake, several hundred feet below sea level.
The wind would drive down over the hills
and churn up the lake,
and those of you who boat,
you'll know that shallow lakes
quickly become treacherous
in high winds.
But it was Jesus in the boat,
so he knew exactly how much danger they were in from the sea.
And this is important, really, really important:
Jesus didn't say to them,
"there's nothing to be afraid of."
He didn't suggest for a moment
that the disciples were wrong
in their estimation of the storm.
Rather, Jesus asked them,
"why are you afraid?
Have you still no faith?"

During a noisy, windy thunderstorm
or a blinding snow squall,
we might tell our children
(and our dogs, and our cats, and ourselves!)

that there's nothing to be afraid of,
 and most of the time, it's true;
 but not all the time!
 The power can go out,
 a tree can be blown over onto the roof,
 flood waters can rise,
 white-out conditions can emerge,
 tornadoes can form seemingly out of nothing...
 ...however remote, it's not, strictly-speaking,
 true to say that there's nothing
 to be afraid of.
 Although it might seem kind of picky,
 there's a big difference between
 "there's nothing to fear" and
 "do not be afraid."
 And it's "do not be afraid"
 that Jesus is asking his disciples about.

The question, the whole moment, seems to backfire, though.
 Instead of encouraging the disciples to relax,
 to likewise be at peace and be still,
 Jesus has caused them to "fear a great fear."
 Why is that, do you think?
 Faith in God-with-us,
 Jesus being in the boat with us,
 that gives you and I hope, doesn't it,
 even in the darkest and most fearful
 moments of our lives.
 The disciples had been around Jesus long enough to know
 that he had extraordinary gifts and powers to heal and cast out demons,
 and that he was a uniquely wise and compelling teacher.
 When disabled people stood up and walked,
 people with leprosy were healed,
 and demons fled,
 the disciples were not deeply afraid.
 But this powerful display of authority over creation itself
 was too much for them.
 It made it clear that Jesus was more than a healer or a teacher;
 that he was, in fact, God himself.
 It's one thing to be a follower of someone great,
 to have hitched your wagon
 to a charismatic healer and teacher.
 But things are different when you realise
 that you're in the presence,

not of a gifted person,
but of God.
And the disciples were terribly afraid.

The bit we read from the Book of Job gives us a sense
of why they were so afraid.
Our God is a God of unmeasurable, vast power over all creation,
and he is fierce in his proclamation
of that boundless power.

The take-home message of Job's experiences
is that God is God and we are not,
and sometimes that's a really, really good and amazing gift,
and sometimes it's an overwhelming, frightening truth.
The disciples discovered that
the man dozing in the boat beside them
has the same unmeasurable, vast,
boundless command and power
over creation.
And they were afraid.
But even more awe-inspiring and overwhelming
is the faith we have that God's love
– Jesus' love –
for us is
likewise vast, unmeasured, and boundless...
...and given freely.

The novel Pilgrim's Progress recounts a dream pilgrimage
of the trials and adventures of a good man named Christian
as he flees his home, the City of Destruction,
for the Celestial City, Heaven.
It's a symbolically-rich story of a journey of faith:
Christian travels through dangers and distractions
like the Slough of Despond, Vanity Fair,
and Doubting Castle.
His companions on the way
are named things like
Faithful, Hopeful, and Obstinate.

Near the end of his journey,
Christian must cross a large and fearsome river,
and he is horribly afraid.
Together with his companion, Hopeful,
they wade into the waters.

Christian cries out, "I sink in deep waters,
the billows go over my head,
all his waves go over."
Hopeful responds to him with the kind of hope
that only faith can bring.
He says,
"Be of good cheer, my brother,
I feel the bottom and it is good."

The hard truth is that there are things in this world to be afraid of,
and they are very real:
accidents, illness, losing one's job,
money problems, failure, broken relationships,
rejection, loneliness, isolation and pain.
These are unavoidable realities,
part of the broken world we live in.
But as we grow in faith,
we come to understand that
even though such fear-worthy things are real,
they do not have the last word.
They do not have ultimate power over us,
because reigning over
this world of fearsome things...
...is a God who is
so much mightier,
whose strength and justice and holiness
far outweighs
any hard or painful thing,
a God from whose love we cannot be separated,
not by anything in creation.
We do not need to be afraid.
Not because there's nothing to be afraid of,
not because there are no storms,
no fierce winds or no waves;
we do not need to be afraid
because Jesus is with us.
We are not alone in the boat.
AMEN.