

## **Calm Amidst the Storm**

### **Exodus 14:10-15 and Luke 8:22-25**

As we continue our series in Luke's gospel, we come to one of those passages that lends itself easily to imagining ourselves in the story—either as a participant or as a witness to what's going on. It's a beneficial way to read any of the gospel accounts, if we can take the time to picture ourselves in them, and pay attention to what we're seeing, and hearing, and smelling, and noticing, and pay attention to our response to the events or teaching.

And we're invited to use all of our senses in this morning's account, to feel the wind and the waves and pay attention to our own response to what happens...

#### **Luke 8:22-25**

<sup>22</sup> One day Jesus got into a boat with his disciples, and he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side of the lake." So they put out, <sup>23</sup> and while they were sailing, he fell asleep. A windstorm swept down on the lake, and the boat was filling with water, and they were in danger. <sup>24</sup> They went to him and woke him up, shouting, "Master, Master, we are perishing!" And he woke up and rebuked the wind and the raging waves; they ceased, and there was a calm. <sup>25</sup> He said to them, "Where is your faith?" They were afraid and amazed, and said to one another, "Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?"

This is the word of the Lord.

If we could take a few minutes and share our reactions to being in the boat with the disciples (we're not going to do that; but if we did) it would be interesting to hear what those reactions were. My guess is that most of us would identify with the disciples in their fear. Before we get to that...

After the storm is calmed, the disciples ask a good question: Who is this? Even though they've been with him for about a year at this point and have seen some pretty amazing things, they continue to ask, "Who is he?" Jesus himself will ask them this very question after almost *three* years: Who do you say I am?

And I appreciate that this question lingers in the New Testament—including in Paul's letters. If we read all of Paul's letters carefully, in chronological order—written over the span of 20 years—we can tell that his understanding of Jesus grew and changed; his own personal faith in Jesus Christ grew and changed. So I appreciate that the question, "Who is Jesus?" lingers in the Bible. Because it tells us that a disciple's understanding of who Jesus is grows. It isn't static. It's a dynamic thing, learning more about who Jesus is, **and** learning more about who you and I are as we grow and change. Life's experiences and challenges, and simply the march of time, give us fresh eyes and new perspective on many things, including our view of Jesus. And, as more time is spent with Jesus, and more is

experienced, and revealed, our understanding grows. And perhaps our amazement. Like with the disciples.

So as we journey with Jesus through Luke, let's let that question linger: who is Jesus?

The other theme that lingers throughout the Bible—not just in the New Testament but throughout the Old Testament as well—is the very human experience of fear. Fear based in *real situations*, like boats getting swamped with water; and fear that comes from *imagined scenarios*, as our mind goes to work on us to create all of the “what if” situations. The Bible seems more concerned with the latter aspect of fear, but even in the real and imminent danger situations, like the ones we heard from Exodus and from Luke this morning, leaders like Moses and Jesus seem to tell us that we don't *have to* be afraid.

With that in mind let's reflect on two observations from this boating adventure with the disciples and then on the Exodus account, which is similar in nature because it involves things like water and danger and fear of death:

1. Jesus isn't afraid. He isn't scared. If there is anything we learn about Jesus from this story—in addition to the fact that he is powerful—it's that Jesus appears to be the most non-anxious presence in the world. I mean, who sleeps in the back of a boat during a storm when the boat is

starting to get swamped?!? He was so cool and calm that he could continue his nap while the boat was being tossed around and getting swamped with water. And, even when he is woken up by the disciples he doesn't freak out ("oh my gosh, look at this storm; we're all gonna drown!!").

Jesus isn't afraid. When I put myself in this story, this is one of the things I notice; and, I confess, it kind of bothers me. I want to say to Jesus: "How are you not freaking out right now?!?" Jesus isn't afraid. This holds true throughout his life. He isn't scared **about** anything, and he isn't scared **of** anything or *anyone*. Read through the gospels—he never wrings his hands over something that **might** happen, or worry about some person who **might** be upset, or who **might** be sick and **might** die. Jesus is remarkably free of all of that.

I know, I know, he's Jesus and we're not. Of course he isn't afraid—he's God incarnate. But we also know and believe that he was fully human, just as we are. And to that extent Jesus shows us what a *human* response can be to the fears that we all face—because he faced them too. That's the point of the incarnation, of God becoming human. During Holy Week, especially at the end, we see a very human Jesus who becomes shaken, dejected, and afraid. Was he unflappable then? Well, he certainly wasn't stoic; yet he faced betrayal, fear, and

death with a kind of faith and courage that trusted that he was in God's hands, and that all was being worked out as he consented to God's good will.

So, Jesus can become our teacher and show us how to face storms and fears with faith, and with strength and courage. We learn that, not just from this event, but throughout the witness of the gospels. I believe that's why Jesus was so calm; because *he* had faith; a human faith that assured him that the God of creation was with him.

Along with that is the assurance that this faithful (unflappable) Jesus is *with us*. The risen Christ is with you and me. So, whatever it is we may be facing in our life, we remember that Jesus is with us, and that Jesus isn't freaked out by it, upset by it, or overwhelmed by it. Jesus isn't looking at your life and your circumstances and going, "Oh my heavens, what are we going to do about *that?!?*" There isn't anything he hasn't seen before and handled before. Jesus is calm, and he is powerful to *bring* calm and peace. The not-freaked-out-God, in Jesus Christ, is with you.

And believe it or not, Jesus isn't looking at what's happening in our world or our country and wringing his hands about that either. God has seen some pretty messed up national and international situations over the course of human history. God cares, deeply, about what's messed up, because God cares about human

thriving and justice and mercy and the like. Yet Jesus isn't wringing his hands about it. There has always been an ebb and flow to the developments of human history. Cycles of moving forward, and then what looks like moving backward, to go forward again. Again, he clearly cares, and cares deeply about people. The point is, Jesus isn't freaked out by what's happening in our lives or in the world. It's new to *us*, but not to God. And that assures me.

Think about it: that same Jesus who was asleep in the back of the boat during the storm over 2,000 years ago is with you in the storms of your life, and has the power to calm them. That is reassuring. One of my favorite lines in all of the hymns and songs that have been written is from the song we're going to sing in a few moments: "Be still my soul, the waves and winds still know his voice who ruled them while he dwelt below." That's a brilliant and reassuring line. Even the winds and the waves know his voice. And we can know his voice too.

So, Jesus is not afraid. And this not-afraid Jesus is with us. And he is powerful. We cannot eliminate the *causes* of fear in our life—storms will come! In fact, Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble"—but we can believe that Jesus is present with us in each of them, and we can trust him to bring calm, and to teach us how to be calm and have peace. Which leads to the second observation:

2. Jesus's response to the disciples. Jesus seems to scold them. Did you get that sense from his response to them? Jesus may not be afraid, however he is a bit feisty. He stills the storm, he calms their fear about the storm. That's reassuring. But then he kind of rebukes them with a question: "Where is your faith?" In the other accounts of this story from Matthew and Mark's gospels, they record Jesus asking an additional question: "Why are you afraid?"

These questions make me wonder: What did Jesus expect them to do? Did he expect *them* to still the storm? Was he grumpy because they woke him up out of a deep sleep by frantically yelling in his ear?

I mean, was it completely unreasonable for them to be concerned and afraid? Think about it, half of these guys in the boat with him are seasoned fishermen and boaters. They're not afraid of a little bad weather—it happened a lot on the Sea of Galilee—squalls would come up without warning; that wasn't unusual. So this windstorm must have been unusually *big* and *bad* to scare these guys the way it did. I mean, their boat was getting swamped. So their fear makes sense to me in terms of the storm. They could drown. That was a real possibility.

So what's up with Jesus' questions?

Here's what I think Jesus is saying by asking these questions:

I think what he expected from his disciples was that they would indeed wake him up and expect that he would do *something* to make them safe, yet that they would have enough faith *that Jesus cared about them* that they wouldn't be so freaked out in the process. Their lack of faith here was not in his *ability*, but in his heart; their lack of faith in his care for them.

Notice their statement to him (*shouting*, as Luke tells us) when they wake him up: "*We are perishing!*" In other words, "Don't you care? Aren't you aware of what's going on here, that our lives are in danger?" In fact, in Mark's version of this story that's exactly what the disciples say, "*Do you not care* that we are perishing?" I think that's what Jesus was getting at with his questions. The disciples were probably not questioning Jesus' power or ability, but whether or not he really cared. They woke him up because they knew he could do *something*. They had seen his miracles before this.

The problem is, they questioned his heart. You can imagine them saying, "If you really cared about us, you wouldn't have stayed asleep; you would've been aware of the situation, woken up, and done something. And since you didn't wake up to do something *right away*, we're not sure you really care."

And this seems to be a reflexive human response to life's storms, and that probably explains my reaction, when I put myself in the story, of being bothered that Jesus was so non-anxious. It feels like he doesn't care.

Many peoples' response to God in life's challenges is something like: "Since you're not dropping everything, hurrying up, and fixing my situation RIGHT NOW, that means you don't care." That seems silly when we think about it. But it's sometimes how we react *in the moment*.

And at the heart of fear for many people—that is, when fear begins to settle in and mess with our thoughts and emotions—at the heart of fear is the question, "Does God truly care?" We may ask, "Lord, will you really do something about what's going on in my life? Do I matter to you? I'm perishing here!" And the faith that Jesus asks us to have in the midst of our storms and our fears is more than just faith that he *can* do something, but first and foremost, faith and trust that *he loves you* and cares about you.

So... more important than Jesus making the storm go away was his desire to have his disciples trust his heart and his goodness. And, more important than Jesus taking our problems away is learning to have the disposition of heart and mind that helps us take steps toward trusting in God's love for us in Jesus Christ, no matter what.

Storms will come and go. Circumstances change. God never changes, though. His heart goes out to us, and to all, in the storms of life. And when we let God be God in the midst of them, answers will come, and solutions will emerge. Maybe not as amazing as what the disciples got. But whatever solution comes, it's because of God's care for us.

Let's connect the dots to the Exodus story for a moment. Here is another story that includes water that people could drown in, the peoples' response to it, and God's response to them. This is one of my favorite accounts in the Bible, because it's so real and so human. And, it reveals a good leadership lesson, which is always of interest to me.

Here are a people who have just been set free by God; they have experienced salvation; accompanied by miraculous signs and wonders no less (10 plagues, the pillars of cloud by day and fire by night to guide them); the people have seen God's wonders and are journeying, in freedom, away from captivity. Yet they now feel the heat of the pursuing Egyptians behind them, and are stuck with the Red Sea in front of them. And what did the people do?? They freaked out! (like we probably would, and like the disciples in the boat did)

And then they did what even people of faith can be prone to do in situations like that: they complained! To Moses. Even though it's very clear up to this point

that everything was God's doing; *God* got them out of Egypt; *God* was leading them; *God* told them to go to this specific location at the edge of the Sea. If they had GPS it would've shown the exact coordinates of that location that God gave them to go to. But Moses was the flesh and blood person they could look at and say, "This is your fault."

Moses is going to get a lot of this complaining as they make their way through the wilderness, after this. The people consistently wanted to go back to Egypt, even though going back meant slavery. In the wilderness they were saying things like, "But they fed us decent food back there; we had decent beds to sleep on; we could be nice slaves there." That was later when they faced some challenges in the wilderness, but the complaining *began* as soon as they made their way out of Egypt. Their griping to Moses that you heard in the Exodus reading is almost funny: "Were there no graves in Egypt that you brought us out here to die?" I love the Message translation: "Weren't the cemeteries big enough...?" Obviously, the people are afraid.

And Moses realizes that—that beneath their complaining is fear. And in a touching scene Moses stands in the gap and tells the people: don't be afraid. God will make a way. And he tells them, "Stand firm." In other translations it says, "Stand still." That sounds ridiculous in this situation. But stillness here

doesn't mean "do nothing;" it means silence the voices of fear within; still the inward agitating, and quiet yourself down. Stand firm in your resolve to trust that the Lord will fight for you, he says. I love that line; the Lord will fight for you. You only need keep still (i.o.w. inwardly quiet in mind & heart) and you'll see it. Quiet yourself so you can see and hear clearly.

When we're in the grips of fear we can't see or hear clearly, can we? We lose vision and perspective because our minds are noisy with so much chatter. So we need to quiet our hearts and minds in order to trust, and even see that God really is at work. God has been with you up to this point, he's not going to abandon you now!

Moses could've said a whole lot of other things to the complaining Israelites. He could've said, "Fine; go back to Egypt; see if I care." No, Moses is a good leader; he sees that they are afraid and he keeps them encouraged. And, he himself has faith on their behalf. *That's* good leadership! Faith leadership, specifically. He trusts that God will act and he invites them to follow. Moses has faith; which manifests itself as true courage: *taking action* in spite of fear.

Then God himself intervenes and tells Moses to tell the people: go forward! Get moving! Move on! Don't become paralyzed by uncertainty, or by

how awful you think your situation is. Don't let fear immobilize you. God will make a way.

And God did. We know how this story ends. Or, rather, how it *begins*. This is just the beginning of their story as a free people. The Israelites pass through the Sea, the pursuing Egyptians are gone, and God's people land safely on the other side, and *begin* their time of journey in the wilderness, and of learning to live as God's free people. It won't be easy; they're about to begin a 40-year camping trip through wilderness. But they're doing it as free people. That's the point.

Friends, let me borrow Moses' words, and say: don't be afraid. No matter what is going on in your life, God will fight for you. Jesus cares for you. God will make a way—in your life, and in the world. God will bring freedom from whatever feels like captivity right now, or what feels like an overwhelming storm. We simply need to try to still our hearts and minds as best as we can, and go forward as best we can. It isn't always clear what God is up to or where God is ultimately leading—the people of old didn't know, and neither do we. I don't think we're meant to know. But because it's God who is doing the leading, steps along the way will be shown to us, and the result will produce blessing.

Be Still My Soul