

Lec 12B, June 23, 2024

Job 38:1-11, Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32, 2 Corinthians 6:1-13, Mark 4:35-41

St Paul Newark-Barbara Melosh

Gary and I recently returned from a small ship cruise. We'd been on a couple of ships this size before, and I looked forward to doing yoga on the deck, standing in the bow to watch the sunset, gazing at the ocean or the scenery on land as we sailed from one interesting port to the next.

Instead, we had an adventure we hadn't expected, caught in a storm in the north Atlantic. In the end we missed eight of the ports on our itinerary—too rough to get there—and we spent three long days and nights rolling and pitching in swells that got up to eighteen feet. In all that time we didn't see another vessel—just open water, heaving all around us, whipped up by the wind. A lot of people got seasick, and though we did not, I felt uneasy as we lurched and staggered around the ship and watched others do the same. We were a long way from home, and if anyone was injured or seriously ill, it would be on the ship's doctor to do whatever little could be done to hold on until we could get to help.

Now of course this was nothing like the peril that people have faced on the sea for centuries, but it did give me a whole new respect for the power of nature, and the vulnerability of human beings in the face of the storm. I thought of St Paul and the shipwrecks he listed among his many trials. The bold explorers who set out in uncharted waters for unknown destinations the captives who suffered and died in the hulls of slave ships; the immigrants in steerage, fleeing famine and poverty and violence to wait in hope for the sight of the Statue of Liberty; the refugees and immigrants today, attempting dangerous journeys on unsafe small boats or rafts.

Today's readings proclaim the God who commands the wind and the sea, in all their power and majesty. God is God of the whirlwind—a God who blows away all our ideas of order, all our delusions of control. God is God of the storm, calling us out of safe harbor into risk and danger.

In *The Perfect Storm*, a book that became a movie, Sebastian Junger tells the riveting true story of a terrible storm at sea that took the lives of a seasoned crew of fishermen. Through his research, Junger was able to put

together the last two days of this boat caught far out at sea in a storm of unusual force. The movie brings that to life in unforgettable images—we follow the relationships of the crew and captain, the fateful decision to go out further in spite of storm warnings, the approaching storm, and the crew's skilled and determined efforts to ride it out. But as the hours pass, the storm builds to terrifying intensity, and the crew struggles to keep the boat from shattering as it is lifted up and then slammed back into the trough of the waves.

After hours of pitching in the storm, the boat is badly damaged, and only the captain and one crew member have survived. The captain stays with the boat, knowing it will soon capsize. The other man goes over the side, where he knows he will soon drown in the open sea. In the last frames, we see him bobbing in the water, tossed around in his lifejacket. The camera backs away from him, widening the frame until the whole screen is filled with the vast heaving swells of the stormy sea, and we can barely see the tiny doomed human figure.

In Mark, the disciples are caught in a sudden storm. Evening has come, but Jesus has told his disciples to get into the boat cross the sea of Galilee to the other side—Gentile territory. And then, Mark tells us, “A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped.”

As the winds shriek and the waves break over the boat, where's their leader—the one who told them to set out on this trip? Jesus is in the back of the boat, asleep on a cushion! They shake him awake, cry in alarm and disbelief, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”

Some of you have asked that question yourselves when violent storms blow away your safety—when your heart melts, and you are seized with fear. The sudden shocking diagnosis—and in an instant, you are swept into the whirlwind—consultations, referrals, surgeries, treatments. Or one of those seasons of life where setbacks and challenges pile up and the storm builds and rages. Your mother, who is, or was, independent at 90, falls and breaks a hip. Layoffs at work, will you be next? The air conditioning breaks down, a big branch falls on your roof, and the warning light comes on in

your car. And then it gets worse. The call from the emergency room—“your son has been in a serious accident, we need you to come in...”

“Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”

The cry of the disciples is our cry from the storm—the cry from the trauma unit, the cancer ward, the cry of vulnerable and terrified people around the world—in Darfur, Ukraine, Haiti, Gaza, Nigeria.

“Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”

That cry is the cry of the crucified God himself, who enters into fear and danger and suffering, speaks our own anguished question from the cross—where Jesus cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

In the storm, we come to know the Godforsakenness of the cross itself. There, we come face to face with who we are—storm-tossed and terrified, in desperate need of God’s shalom—God’s wholeness and healing, God’s peace.

In the storm, we come face to face with who God is.

God does not promise to keep us safe. Instead, Jesus calls us today into the risk and danger of his own vulnerable love. He sends us out on the open water, into the storm. We go with God into a world of uncertainty and chance, a world full of both danger and promise—where we are called to pull the oars together, and to set our course for open water--the vast ocean of God’s own wild freedom.

This part of the church that we’re in is called the “nave”—a Latin word that means “ship.” This boat isn’t meant to stay tied up in safe harbor, until the wood rots and metal rusts and barnacles grow on its sides. Jesus sends us to set out for the other side, like the disciples in Galilee. On the open water, we are vulnerable to storms. But we are not alone. We are there together. There are other boats around us. And in our midst is the one who speaks the word of peace in the midst of the storm—“Peace, be still.”

Let us pray.

O God of the whirlwind, you send us into open water. As the wind blows and the waves rise, hold us in the arms of your shalom. When the storms come, keep us steadfast in your word. In shipwreck, gather up the broken pieces of our shattered lives, and make them the foundation for new life. In the midst of it all—in storm and shipwreck-- let us hear your voice, saying “Peace, be still.”