

Lord of the Fearful

(1 **Samuel 17** selected verses; 2 Corinthians 6: 1-13; Psalm 9: 9-20; **Mark 4: 35-41**)

Today the Lectionary has given us two of the blockbuster stories of the Bible. One from the Old Testament and one from the New, these would be hard to beat in terms of dramatic development and gripping power. These are stories that can pull us in and take us along for the ride, if we let them. Let me show you a couple of ways in which we can do that.

With regard to the old story about David and Goliath, here's something I heard from Rabbi Gunther Plaut in Toronto. He described how, when listening to the story in school as a very young boy, he and his classmates were encouraged to go out into the schoolyard first and each find a smooth stone, then they were to gently rub that stone between their fingers as the story was being read. So, I suggest that you try that. Go out and find a little stone, maybe in your driveway or garden. Then hold that stone in your hand and read again the scene from the story, where David takes his stone in hand.

Now, for the story about Jesus and the lads in the storm of their lives, I think we can make this one "fully interactive" if we work a little *field trip* right into the sermon. I want you to come along with me to an art gallery in Boston. Even if art galleries aren't your cup of tea, this one happens to be quite close to Fenway Park where the Boston Red Sox play, so there's a good chance you can find something more interesting to do while the rest of us are at the gallery. The Isabella Stewart Gardner gallery has a large area called "The Dutch Room" which holds an impressive collection of works by the Dutch Masters. The work we have come to see is called "*The Storm on Galilee*" and it was painted by Rembrandt. It's a very famous work. I happen to think it's one of Rembrandt's best in terms of what it makes your mind and your stomach do while you're looking at it. OK, the bus has just delivered us to the gallery. Now we're coming up the wide stairway from the main entrance toward "the Dutch Room" and the object of our search should be in the middle of the larger of three rooms, and there on the wall where the painting *should be...is... is an empty frame*, and a little bronze plaque telling us that the artwork we came to see was *stolen* in a daring caper one night in 1990 along with a dozen other famous artworks, and the plaque says this is where we *will* find "The Storm on Galilee" *if* it ever returns home. At the bottom of the plaque there's a plea to the thieves not to *damage* the painting, and there's a sizable *reward* offered for information leading to an arrest!

Well, *this* was a trip to the art gallery that we won't soon forget! Lucky for us, I have a "Plan B". How about a field trip that comes to *us*? And voila! Now, even though this picture of the painting is about



10 times smaller than the original, you can get a lot *closer* to it than you would have done in the museum! So, take a close look at the painting, and here's your 2-part assignment: (1) Look at the boat until you begin to see it move, or at least until your stomach begins to move; and (2) count the number of people in the boat.

The first thing you notice in the painting, even before you get down to any detail, is the movement of that boat. The poor little thing is being lifted on the crest of a monstrous wave, the sails and rigging are already damaged. Near the front of the boat, some of the crew are struggling to secure the rigging in any way they can. In the back half of the boat which, due to that monstrous wave, is notably lower than the front half, there the crew are basically

huddling for cover. The guy on the tiller is clearly being out-muscled by the wind. There's one fellow losing his lunch over the rail. Something else that's going on in the back of the boat: three guys are facing, screaming at and even *grabbing* at a fourth fellow who, almost incredibly, looks as cool as a cucumber—he's in a relaxed position and there's *no* fear depicted on *his* face.

Now, if you can count the *number* of people in the boat, you will see five disciples near the front (they're the easiest to see), there are 5 more in a fairly straight line across the middle of the boat, and then 4 more down around the stern. That gives us a count of *14*. The *one* fellow who appears unruffled and almost even a little sleepy, we can safely assume that's Jesus. So, how many disciples does that leave? *HOW MANY?* But I thought there were only supposed to be *twelve!*

Here's where the eye for detail really gets rewarded: see that fellow by the port rail, in the blue shirt, holding onto the rigging with one hand, holding his head with the other and looking straight out toward the audience? You may have to take my word for this, but *that* is a *self-portrait* of the *artist*. That's Rembrandt's round Dutch face and wide blue eyes, and that's how he gets *himself* right *into* the story! That's how he can feel what the disciples feel, and fear what they fear, and that's also how he knows beyond a doubt what *happens* in the very *next* moment.

It's truly amazing what you can learn when you get inside *any* of these gospel stories. On that boat with Rembrandt and the rest of the disciples, one thing you're going to learn is that your fears are *always worse* than the storm itself. Think about what the storm says to you. Actually, you can see this part by the guys in the front of Rembrandt's boat. The *storm* tells you to furl the sails if you can, either fasten the rigging or cut it away, do what you can to *survive* the situation. Now, compare that with what your fears tell you, and this is what you see in those characters who are getting right in the face of Jesus: the *fears* say "We're all going *to drown!* We're going down, and if you don't save us right this minute, we're lost forever!"

The fears are far worse than the storm, aren't they? They're a lot more pessimistic, they're couched in doubt, they're not thinking clearly about *who* it is that's there *with* them, *in that storm*. And do you see what's the real *miracle* in this story? It's not just that Jesus could calm the storm and quiet the wind, rather it's that he could calm the *fears* in the hearts of his disciples and quiet their irrational thoughts and their shouts of desperation. There's the miracle: it's not so much the Lord of the *Storm*, it's the Lord of the *Fearful*.

Do you want to see another way in which you can make the story even more interactive that the artist did? Well, I think it may be true that, for a lot of modern folks, the image of a storm is perhaps not as scary as it used to be. We can thank Hollywood for that. Wild weather and storms at sea are stock images in thousands of films and, with perhaps the sole exception of the film, "The Perfect Storm", the story turns out OK, the heroes live on, the sun shines again. But how about if we substitute a different kind of storm into our story? Here's a scenario that can set off a massive storm where the fears blow even louder than the wind: the doctor calls you in to discuss your test results and he delivers an unexpected and unwelcome diagnosis. The fears go from zero to Gale Force in about 2 seconds, and your fears start shouting so loud in your head that you can't hear clearly what the doctor is saying.

Sometimes the stock market can set off one of those internal storms. You learn that your investments are going down deeper than the Titanic; your retirement nest egg just got scrambled; your pension plan is officially "insolvent". Suddenly the waves are coming so high you can't see the horizon.

Here's another storm that we in the mainline region of Christianity can often sense. Curiously, this one is referred to in our gospel story this morning. Did you notice the statement in that story, just before the storm hit, to the effect that "there were *other* boats with them?" Well, in the early Church, for at least the first *four* centuries, the "boat" was the stock symbol for "the church". One clue to that idea is the fact that when Christian churches began to develop their own architecture, the main body of their buildings—the place where the congregation sits—was in the shape and style of a ship. Rows of seats, all facing the same direction, with a long central aisle, just like the ships on the Mediterranean with each row pulling an oar together while facing the one who sets the pace and calls out the orders. Another clue to the same connection between the ship and the church can be found in the *word* for this central part of the church, which is the "nave", which comes from the Greek word *naus* meaning "ship".

Well, in our gospel story, the boat the disciples were in, and those "other boats" also, all had a very strong sense that "the wind was against them". Does that sound like perhaps the majority of congregations in the contemporary Western world? Having trouble just *surviving*, never mind actually growing? Having trouble seeing any *distant* horizon? Feeling like we're going down within a generation or two? I hear a lot of prayers going up from worried churches that sound *just like* those disciples yelling at Jesus. "Don't you care that we're going to drown?"

This story reminds us, in powerful and timely fashion, that Jesus *does indeed* care—enough to be right here *with* us in the same storm, enough to tackle not merely the wind and waves but even our *fears*. And if we let him, he will command our fears to be *quiet*, he'll command us to *listen to* him rather than *shout at* him, to *trust* him rather than *doubt* him. The one who calls us to follow him and trust him is truly the Lord of the Fearful.

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