

The Eye of the Storm

sermon digest

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Mark 4:35-41;6:47-52

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In August, 1945, I had just turned six and would begin first grade after Labor Day. Germany had surrendered on May 7. The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6 and 9 led to the surrender of Japan on August 15. Right in the middle of the ecstasy over the end of the war, nature unleashed a hurricane on the Texas Gulf Coast aimed directly at where we lived in Houston. Dad worked at the steel mill a block from our house. As usual, he had walked to work and would be walking home. As the storm raged, Mother kept looking out the front door for Dad. I recall my mother's anxiety and watching a big pine tree in our front yard suddenly yield to the wind and fall across the street. Shortly after the tree fell, the storm began to subside. Dad arrived in his rain slick, wet and weary but whole. He had wisely waited for the wind to calm before venturing out of the plant.

The next day was clear and sunny as if the storm was just a bad dream. I remember the excitement as several men in the neighborhood helped Dad remove the fallen tree with a borrowed crosscut saw. The 1945 hurricane is a memory my family has enjoyed telling, embellishing, and debating over the years. I was very young and remember feeling more excitement than fear of the storm. I obviously did not understand the seriousness of the situation. In retrospect, the story stayed with our family because we were survivors. In one summer, we had survived both the War and the storm. Periodically I have the chilling awareness that survival was never a given. Life does not come with a warranty, no guarantees of survival. While we escaped the crisis, we were also aware that the storm had taken property and lives just as the war had devastated families in our neighborhood and church.

Nature gives and destroys life. We only need to observe the news about the earthquakes in Nepal to be reminded of the death and destruction that comes through forces in nature beyond our control. After the death of his close friend, Tennyson declared, "Nature is red in tooth and claw." I suspect that the common human experience with the threatening violence of nature has a lot to do with the inclusion of nature miracles in the Gospels. The most obvious connection of the miracles in today's texts is the Old Testament identity of the sea with the primordial chaos preceding the creation. For Christian Jewish roots, the sea, while a means of employment for disciples, was the standing symbol of evil in the world, a place outside human control. The command of Christ in calming the storm, "Peace, be still," employed the same word in commanding demons to be silenced.

Mark contains two nature miracles concerning storms on the Sea of Galilee. Both stories are repeated with slight differences in three of the four Gospels; their repetition is evidence of the importance of these stories to early Christians. Also the Sea of Galilee is a central geographical feature of the Gospels. Jesus had called disciples from their fishing business on the Sea to "fish for people." The miracle of the great catch of fish, Luke's embellishment of the calling of disciples, appears at the end of John's Gospel after Easter.

PHEME PERKINS (*The New Interpreter's Bible*, VIII, p. 604) believes that the two sea miracles in Mark may have been variations of the same story about an epiphany, a manifestation of the power of God; and John Paul Heil, *Jesus Walking on the Sea*, contends that walking on the sea belongs to the resurrection appearances of Jesus rather than to his ministry. The miracles on the Sea of Galilee are classified as "nature miracles," suggesting that, like God, Jesus was in control, stopping storms with a word and defying gravity by walking over the water. They were not public miracles. The only witnesses were disciples. So they have raised more questions than answers.

Paul Achtemeier makes two important observations: (1) Miracles were commonly claimed for religious and political leaders of the time and would not have proven anything unique about Jesus. (2) Miracles were morally neutral and could have been viewed as acts of the devil as well as God. Jesus was actually accused of being in league with Beelzebub as the source of his supernatural power. Achtemeier concludes: "Jesus does not draw significance from the fact that he performs miracles; rather, the miracles are significant because they are performed by Jesus, who is the Son of God" (*Jesus and the Miracle Tradition*, p. 2). The essential question, pervasive in Mark, is raised by the disciples: "Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

Walking on water and controlling storms are symbols of deity. The miracles of Jesus in the Gospels are so prevalent that no one interested in understanding the Christ of the Gospels can simply

dismiss the importance of the miraculous. Paul Achtemeier reports that about one-third of Mark revolves around miracles, but he also acknowledges the tendency of modern students of the New Testament to be more embarrassed than impressed. Scepticism has come with the rise of modern science. Miracles are sometimes explained by acrobatic leaps into “facts” beyond the text and often beyond credibility. For example, an elaborate description of shallow flats in the Sea of Galilee at the mouth of the Jordan River has provided a recent explanation of “Why and How Jesus Walked on the Sea” (J. Duncan Derrett, *Novum Testamentum*, XXIII, 1981, 330ff). To add insult to injury, Israel’s National Parks Authority has constructed a floating, slightly submerged bridge on the Sea of Galilee near Capernaum to allow tourists to imitate Jesus.

In St. Louis we lived in the midst of a large Jewish population, and the local Synagogue was a couple of blocks from our house located on a large lot with a lake between the street and the house of worship. One day I teased my Jewish neighbor with the observation that learning to swim must be a basic requirement of belonging to his congregation. He quickly came back with the observation that at least they were not required to walk on water like Christians.

You may recall that Pat Robertson seriously claimed to have redirected Hurricane Isabel away from the coast of Virginia. He later blamed the sins of victims of tornadoes for bringing the fury of the wind on their property.

Regardless of the history, “walking on water” has become an icon for divinity. During Lyndon Johnson’s presidency an apocryphal story circulated about an incident at the Texas White House. Press Secretary Bill Moyers, a Baptist seminary graduate, read about Jesus walking on the Sea in a Sunday gathering of the staff. As the story goes, Johnson was rescued later that evening by the Secret Service when he was found trying to walk across a cow pond. Johnson actually did complain, “If one morning I walked on top of the water across the Potomac River, the headline that afternoon would read: PRESIDENT CAN’T SWIM.”

The Sea miracles are not intended as jokes; however, they do point to a common conclusion. The Gospel stories of Jesus and the Sea intend for us to see the power of God in Christ. The one who appeared to the disciples as a ghost on the water was like the risen Christ in his appearance to his followers. Like the God of grace they had met in Christ, he would be present in times of great crisis to calm their fear and to remind them of God’s dominance of nature and all of the powers on the earth. The word of Christ walking toward disciples on the Sea was “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” The sentence “It is I” is found throughout John’s Gospel translated “I am,” reminiscent of Moses at the burning bush. God is the “I am” of the ancestors.

The peace of Christ be with you. Last Sunday as we concluded our celebration of Holy Communion, we greeted one another with the traditional passing of the peace of Christ: “the peace of Christ be with you”— “and also with you.” Perhaps the Evangelists who wrote our four Gospels intended for us to overcome the powers of nature through invoking the presence of Christ. Perhaps they were suggesting that through prayer we can redirect a hurricane, silence the wind, bring a storm to an abrupt halt, defy gravity, avoid death. If that was the intent, they failed to demonstrate control of the powers of nature. Early Christians prayed as they succumbed to disease, or drowned in the Sea. Like Rabbi Jesus, they died on Roman crosses. So I am convinced that they did not take the message of Jesus and the storms as an escape from the inevitable ending of our lives on earth. The disciples who saw Christ walking on the water and heard the voice of calm ordering the storm to cease, all of them eventually died. They died in faith, but their lives came to an end.

I suspect that they took away from the experience of the Sea something other than an escape from the power of nature. They found that the love of God is greater than the power of death, that the God who created nature is always Lord of the powers that threaten us with fear and death. They learned through Christ to live through storms and trust God for the final word.

If you have seen the satellite photographs of tropical storms, you have seen the circular movement of the clouds, the winds, and the rain. At the center of the raging storm is an area about twenty miles in diameter of relative calm. It may appear that the storm is over, but as the hurricane presses forward the back side of the storm is as dangerous as the front.

Just as the Christ was as concerned with calming the fears of his disciples as in calming the raging

winds of the storm, the shalom of Christ is something greater than nature miracles. Christ leads us to the eye of the storm at the center of our lives, where God dwells and rules. This living presence is what Paul describes: “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” The peace of Christ is the eye of the storm where our confident hope in the power of God over life and death sustains us for the rest of the storm.