

“I HEARD AN OLD, OLD STORY: IV – JESUS STILL THE STORM”
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Mark 4:35-41

Right now, in movie theaters, the latest iteration of the “Ocean’s” series of movies, “Oceans 8” is playing. I haven’t seen it, but it is about a group of women who scheme together to pull off a heist at the Met Gala in New York City. While the movie is a fantasy, it is not far from the truth of what happens sometimes in big time heists.

Such is the case with that fabulous painting by the famous Dutch artist Rembrandt that you’re seeing up on the screen right now. Painted in 1633 when Rembrandt was just 27, “Christ in the Storm on the Sea of Galilee” was one of his greatest and most well-known works. It was proudly hanging in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, when in the wee hours of March 18, 1990, two men disguised as police officers were let into the museum, whereupon they overwhelmed and bound up the security detail, and then stole thirteen paintings – including this one – all totaled valued at five hundred million dollars! They have never been recovered – and there is a five million dollar reward should you ever run across it in your travels!

But, all kidding aside, it is a tremendous painting, and it so fully and wonderfully depicts today’s Gospel story that I want to use it as we go along in the sermon this morning, because I think Rembrandt has captured so well the emotions we humans experience when we go through storms in our own lives.

Actually, if you take the time to look at all the characters in the boat, I think you can see the progression of feelings we have when going through storms. It kind of reminds me of what famed psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross did in the field of grief study – in identifying the stages of grief – first denial, then anger, then bargaining, followed by depression, and finally acceptance.

Well, here in the boat on the Sea of Galilee, we see all kinds of reactions to the storm that has blown up suddenly and is threatening to take them under. 21 Before we look more closely at them, let me remind you of what came before this. Before this, Jesus and his disciples were ministering to a large crowd of believers, sharing with them parables, including the parable of the mustard seed, and others.

At the end of the day, Jesus told his disciples to go to the boat so they could go to the other side. That seems like a pretty innocuous statement, but going to the other side of the sea meant ministering to unbelievers. It would be totally different from what they had done that day. It would be a challenge. They might not be well received.

But Jesus told them to get in the boat and so they did. Remember it was late in the day and I'm sure they were tired, and the scripture tells us that Jesus fell asleep. Well, soon enough, a storm whips up, a really big, treacherous storm, where the waves grew high and the boat was rocking furiously back and forth. The sails tore, it was becoming almost impossible to steer, and very, very quickly the situation became life-threatening.

You know, a number of years ago when I visited the Holy Land, we got in a boat and went for a ride on the Sea of Galilee. It was so smooth, it was almost like gliding on glass, and it was astonishing to think that that very sea could turn so treacherous. But our guide showed us exactly how that could happen, because at one end of the sea the mountains come together in what looks like a v and winds come through there quickly and almost form a funnel, and rush down onto the water, and a storm whips up in no time. Experienced sailors there know they have to be ready at any time for that to happen.

Well, that's what happened on that fateful night. A violent storm whipped up, and suddenly, without warning, the disciples feel like their lives might end at any moment. (That's what bad storms are like, you know, weather storms and otherwise, too!) So what do they do? How do they handle it? Well, let's take a look.

One of them tried to maintain control, to keep the boat on course. He's the one at the helm, who many assume is Peter. He's staying the course, doing what he's always done, not giving in to the power of the storm, trying to muscle his way through it.

Many of them struggle in vain to regain control of the sails which have ripped away. They're grasping at it, trying to put things back together again, trying to make a quick repair in hopes that everything will return to normal.

But right next to them is a guy who appears to be overwhelmed, scared to death, and clinging on to the guy wire for dear life! It's like he's almost frozen – he can't handle it, he can't help the others, he can't do anything – but hang on for dear life.

Back closer to Jesus is a man whose reaction shouldn't surprise us at all – in fact, it's surprising that aren't more like him – he's leaning over the side of the boat getting sick. His body can't take it – the storm has caused him physical sickness.

There are two people directly next to Jesus who are clearly angry with him, and they are probably the ones who challenged him with the words, “Teacher, don’t you care that we’re perishing?” In the midst of that rolling storm, their anxiety takes over and they lash out at Jesus.

Not far from them, we see a man in prayer. In the midst of the tumult, the only thing he knows to do is pray.

And then, there are a couple of others. There’s that man in white, you see him? Facing away from Jesus, looking like he’s meditating on something. What you probably can’t see from that far away in the distance, in the shadows there appears to be a figure – an angel, perhaps?

Finally, there’s that guy in the hat, the only figure looking directly at us. Most people think that that is Rembrandt himself, because he did, at times paint himself into his portraits. It is thought that Rembrandt, in including himself, is invites us, the viewers, to put ourselves into it as well, and think about who we would be and how we would react in that storm.

That beautiful painting is, I believe, an amazingly accurate portrayal of how we human beings deal with the storms that whip up in life – actually, an amazing portrayal like unto Kubler-Ross’ progression of feelings regarding grief. This is an amazingly accurate portrayal of the progression we humans go through in the midst of storms that threaten us.

When storms come our way, whatever they are – the sudden loss of a job, a bad medical diagnosis, a sudden medical catastrophe, the death of a spouse or child, a financial disaster, a relationship-ending fight – whatever they are, we move through those stages the disciples experienced. We fight, like Peter did, to maintain some control. We try to repair the sails, try to fix whatever we can fix, like some of them did.

Undoubtedly, many times when storms hit, we just hang off for dear life, trying to get from moment to moment. And sometimes, the storms are so bad, and so life-changing, that we get physically sick.

When things are really bad, we even sometimes yell at God. “How could you let this happen? Where are you, God?”

And in our better moments, maybe after all the others, after all the trying our best to handle things on our own, after all the weariness and even the anger, we give it all to God in prayer and meditation and trust.

None of us is immune from the storms of life – none of us. Bad things happen, and very often they happen out of the blue, and threaten to take our feet out from under us. But you know that, don’t you, because if you’ve lived any length

of time at all, you've gone through at least one storm in your life that you thought you might not survive.

For me, the worst storm was Dad's diagnosis with ALS. I remember the very night I heard the news. I was away at a conference in Williamsburg and Susan called to tell me that the diagnosis was official, and I remember feeling instantly panicked. It was like my world was shattered, and I think through the six or so short months of Dad's battle, I and everyone of us in the family, probably went through all those emotions those disciples felt.

But what carried me through, and has no doubt carried all of you, and clearly carried those disciples, was Jesus. Jesus, the serene one in that painting. The one clearly at peace. The one secure in the bosom of his Father's love and protection.

You know, when Jesus asked the disciples about their lack of faith, I don't think he was so much admonishing them, as wishing for them the peace that he found in his faith in God. He wanted them to know deep down inside like he did, that he was never alone, that God was always there, and God always makes a way.

And that, I think, is his invitation to us as well. When storms come, rest in the Lord, let him help you make your way through them – for he always will.

A pastor named Steven Molin wrote an excellent sermon on this Gospel passage and in it he made some points that I'd like to briefly share with you, about handling the storms in your life. First, he says, to always remember that, like he did with the disciples that night, Jesus always sits and suffers with you when storms hit. He's always there, a breath away. Lean on his presence and find peace there.

Secondly, he invites us to remember that every storm ends. Every storm ends. When we're in the midst of one, that's really hard to remember, but indeed, every storm ends. It's like I always say on Easter, death never has the final word – even that storm ended on Easter with resurrection!

Finally, and this is what I really loved about Molin's sermon – he said, when a storm hits you, find a safe harbor – and that harbor is the church. Fight your storm with us, your friends in faith. Lean on your brothers and sisters in Christ who will hold you up and support you every step of the way.

I love that, and I cannot implore you enough to do that. Because you and I have seen over and over again the power of this community to carry people through some pretty terrible storms that life has thrown at them. We surround them in prayer, we provide food, and rides and phone calls and hugs and whatever is needed. Indeed, the church is a safe harbor in which to ride out the storms of life.

So I want to finish today by telling you about a couple of people whose worlds have been rocked by storms. One of them is Kevin Reilly. You remember him is you attended our Joy of Faith weekend this year. He was at the peak of his professional and physical life, when the storm of cancer came viciously blowing through his life. He lost everything important to him, and was told that his life would never be the same, he'd never be able to do this or that again, but he rode out that storm with Jesus, with the love and help of family and friends, and the storm not only ended, but he's come out on the other side victorious and a wonderful, I would daresay, disciple of Christ, helping others face the storm of cancer in their lives as well. He has been a safe harbor for so many in that devastating journey.

The other person I want to tell you about is my cousin Edward. Edward lives just outside of New York City and a couple of months ago he lost his beloved wife Sharen to cancer. Eddie and Sharen were teenage sweethearts and had nearly 60 years of love together. They built a very successful business together, had two beautiful children and four grandchildren, traveled all over the world, enjoyed winters in Florida and summers in Cape Cod. And they are good, good people.

Eighteen years ago, the storm of cancer blew into Sharen's life and at that time she successfully fought it and won. Years later, it came back with a vengeance and a couple of months ago, with Eddie holding her in his arms, she passed from this life to the next.

Eddie has been devastated by her death. So devastated was he, that he and the children and grandchildren had a private funeral when Sharen passed. He couldn't handle seeing anyone or talking to anyone.

Not sure of what would happen, I picked up the phone and called him. When he answered and I said, "Eddie, it's Karen," he started to sob. In the 62 plus years I've known him, I never saw him cry. When I asked how he was doing, he said, "I'm broken."

I forgot to mention that after building that successful company, Ed sold it and went back to school, getting a degree in psychology, so now he's a practicing psychologist. So Ed has all the textbook knowledge of how to get through storms, but none of that mattered, because he was broken.

We talked for a while that morning on the phone, and before the call ended, I asked him what I could do, and he said "pray." So we did. We prayed over the phone.

Every few weeks I call and we pray. Then, as most of you know, a couple of weeks ago, my aunt, who was his mother, died, two days before her 100th birthday. He didn't have the emotional strength to attend her funeral, and all of us understood.

Last Saturday Ed and his family had a memorial gathering for Sharen, and Mom, Susan and I went up for it. Ed is still broken, he cries easily, but little by little, he's getting through the storm. Every morning he gets up and goes for a walk, and as he says, "spends time with Jesus." When I ask how he's doing, he's says that the only way he's getting through it is Jesus.

But he also added one more thing. He said he had invited two of his patients to the memorial gathering, two people who were going through storms of their own, but going through them all alone, because he wanted them to see his safe harbor – his family and friends who were carrying him through the storm. And they came and saw.

Oh friends, storms are never good, but they hit all of us at one time or another. It is okay to feel whatever we're feeling, but in the end, hold on to Jesus. Hold on to Jesus, because he's in the storm with you, the storm will end eventually, and he'll still be with you. And let us, the church, be a safe harbor for you.

As a matter of fact, that's what I want us to be right now. As I look around this room and think of some others who aren't here this morning because they're in the middle of a storm this very moment, I think we have a gift to offer them – and it is prayer. So, instead of singing the hymn, I've asked Susan and Ed to sing some special numbers, as I invite you to come forward to the chancel rail, if you want, and pray for someone that you know is facing a storm right now – someone who is fighting illness, someone who is going through the loss of a job, someone who is alone, someone who has lost a loved one – well, you know the situations – come, and pray for anyone in the midst of a storm that they might rest in the arms of Jesus until the storm passes over.

