

The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
January 29, 2006

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Minneapolis, Minnesota

✧ Jesu juva ✧

PEACE AMID STORMS

Jonah 1:1-17; Matthew 8:23-27

Grace, Mercy and Peace be unto you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

Today we again see Jesus in action showing Himself as the Divine Son of God and showing how He uses His Divine power out of love for His people. This is one of the few Gospel lessons in the Church Year that follows the lesson of the previous week in a relatively sequential manner. Last week we saw Jesus heal a leper and then heal the paralyzed servant of a centurion. In these healings we saw both the power of Jesus to do Divine things and the authority of Jesus to establish the means by which He will perform His Divine works for His people. This week our Lord employs His divine authority and power not over illness and internal suffering, but over the things that threaten to harm us from the outside.

Our Lord had not only healed the leper and the centurion's servant before getting into the boat to cross the sea of Galilee. According to Matthew, as he relates events in the few verses in between the two lessons, he also healed Peter's mother-in-law of a fever, and healed multitudes of people from illness and demon possession at the lake shore. Parallel accounts from Luke and Mark show even more miracles of healing and such, along with extensive teaching taking place that day. At any rate, Jesus had attracted quite a crowd, so many that He actually had to get into a boat in order to have room to teach them. Finally, He desires to depart from this crowd, and knowing that they would just follow Him if He tried to leave by land, He and the disciples get into the boat to cross over the sea. The crowds of sick and demon-possessed are at last left behind and all that is left is Jesus and the twelve, all of them to the best of our knowledge strong and healthy.

And now, at last, the disciples are in their own element, at least some of them. After all, four of the twelve had been professional fisherman on the Sea of Galilee. The confines of their sturdy little ship probably seemed like a very familiar and even safe place to them. Now for a little while, they would do what they knew how to do. They would sail while Jesus rested in the back of the boat.

But suddenly, while they are sailing, Matthew tells us: "a great tempest arose on the sea, so that the boat was covered with the waves." Now you can imagine how those four fisherman who had spent much of their lives on those waters must have reacted. At first they probably didn't think it would be too bad. They had been in storms before and had weathered them. They probably worked hard to keep the ship pointed in the right direction so that she could handle the waves. The others probably tried to scoop the water out. And Jesus, of course, is still sleeping through all of this. Very quickly it becomes apparent to the fisherman that this storm is pretty severe. The waves are crashing over the sides of the ship; and as they take on water the ship rides lower and lower in the water. The disciples find themselves helpless against this storm. Their strength and efforts, knowledge and experience all come to naught against the might of the waves as they crash over the side, threatening to sink them in the tumultuous seas.

At last they wake up Jesus and say: “Lord, save us! We are perishing!” According to St. Mark, they say to Him: “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” I think they must have said this first, seeing that He was asleep while they were all hard at work battling the storm. But seeing that their efforts are doing nothing, that at last pray to Him: “Lord, save us!”

Jesus replies to them: “Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?” The storm is raging all around, the waves crashing and sea foaming and Jesus asks why they are afraid? It seems perfectly natural and right that they should be afraid. But in reality, they had nothing to fear. The Lord was with them. And Jesus stands up in the boat and speaks to the winds and the sea and says “Peace, be still”, and immediately the wind stops blowing, the waves stop beating the boat and everything becomes perfectly calm again.

Matthew tells us: “the men marveled, saying, ‘Who can this be, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?’” I wonder if they didn’t think of Psalm 107, a portion of which we chanted a few moments ago in the Introit: “Those who go down to the sea in ships, who do business on great waters, they see the works of the Lord, and His wonders in the deep. For He commands and raises the stormy wind, which lifts up the waves of the sea. They mount the heavens, they go down again to the depths; their soul melts because of trouble. They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man, and are at their wits end. They cry out to the Lord in their trouble, and He brings them out of their distresses. He calms the storm, so that its waves are still.” Asking the question in awe, they surely knew the answer. This is the Almighty God Himself.

Our Lord used this storm to draw the disciples into deeper faith in Him. They had seen Him work miracles before and had carefully listened to His teaching. But their faith had not been tested. They had not yet been forced to place their trust in Him as their God and Savior, even though they already thought Him to be just that. The storm reveals the condition of their faith in Him. They panic, showing that their faith is not complete, crying out “we perish” and, when He had been sleeping, questioning whether or not He will help them saying “Do you not care?” And yet despite their weakness, faith is still evident, for they turn to Him at last and pray “Lord, save us!” And He does, showing Himself to be worthy of their trust and strengthening their faith in Him so that they would be able to weather the storms that they would shortly face as His apostles.

And the Church often does face storms. The church fathers often said that the Church was a boat or an ark, built out of the wood of the cross, and at sea in this world and attacked by the forces of it, much like the boat of the Apostles was attacked by the stormy sea. But like them, the Church has Christ on board with her and is therefore preserved through the storms so long as she remains faithful to Him, whether those storms be the ravings of the heretics who seek to subvert her faith, or the persecution of the unbelievers who would crush her with violence and wrath. Standing firm upon Christ and His Word, fervent in prayer to Him, these storms cannot hurt her, but rather are used by Jesus to strengthen her faith, causing her to put her trust even more firmly in Him.



And of course storms come into each Christian’s life individually too. Sometimes the storm takes the form of tragedy coming upon you and threatening to crush you whether in flesh or in spirit. A personal loss, a severe illness, an unhappy home, a professional set back, or what have you. At

other times, the storm is the work of others who buffet you with the angry wind of their hurtful words, and seek to sink you with their harsh judgments against you. At still other times, the storm takes the shape of temptations that are thrust in your path by the world and the devil, which seek to steer you off course and into the rocky shoals of sin through lust, covetousness and pride. And some times, as with Jonah, the storms are of you own making, the tumultuous consequences of the sins you have committed against God and your fellow men.

Yes life seems to send an awful lot of storms. How does the Christian stand up against and survive these storms that threaten to destroy hope and faith? Like the disciples we get frightened at times by these storms in life and perhaps even think that they are going to destroy us. We cry out to the Lord: "We are perishing!" And at times it even seems that the Lord is sleeping or that He doesn't care enough to help you.

But that is not the truth. Rather the Lord is using whatever the particular storm happens to be for good purpose, either to bring you to repentance if repentance is necessary, or to draw you into a deeper faith - to cause you to trust in Him rather than in yourself. In the midst of the raging sea and in the face of the tempestuous wind, He wants you to seek Him out and cry out to Him for aid, to say in with the Psalmist in Psalm 44: "Awake! Why do you sleep O Lord? Arise! Do not cast us off forever... Arise for our help, and redeem us for Your mercies' sake."

People think faith is easy, or that it is a cheap way to get on God's good side. But we see here that faith is usually very difficult. It doesn't come naturally to us. We would rather work out our own salvation through our own wisdom and efforts, through the exercise of our own free will, than have to rely on Jesus to save us. And that's why we need storms in life. Storms show us very quickly how helpless we are. Luther says of those who make light of faith and think they have no need of God's grace "I might wish that they had been in the boat with the disciples and experienced free will's capacity in time of extremity and need." In times of need we see that there is no hope in ourselves, and so we are forced to turn to Jesus or to remain in despair.

And as with His disciples, so Jesus promises peace and redemption to us. Sometimes He calms the storm and removes it from us after a time of testing. Other times He lets the storm seethe and like Jonah casts us into the midst of the raging sea that we might be swallowed up and put to death in repentance, before He enlivens us again and brings us back up to shore again. And there are some storms that are never removed, but rather are to be endured until death, yet endured in faith. Because where there is perfect trust in the Lord, there is also perfect peace, no matter what storm may be pounding upon your little boat. Jesus, who is the Almighty God, who exercises authority and power over wind and wave, is also your Lord who loves you and has redeemed you from all sins, from the power of the devil and even from death itself.

This He proves to you in His Holy Word, and gives to you here in the ship of His Holy Church, a ship where He is present through the preaching of His Word and in the Holy Sacraments. And with these He answers your prayers for strength and healing and help. For here He gives you His grace which will strengthen your faith even in the midst of life's relentless storms, and will bring you through them into a safe harbor and life everlasting. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, to life everlasting.

✧ Soli Deo gloria ✧