



The Storm on the Sea of Galilee is a painting from 1633 by the Dutch Golden Age painter Rembrandt van Rijn, Oil on canvas, 160 x 128 cm, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston...On the morning of March 18, 1990, thieves disguised as police officers broke into the museum and stole *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee* and 12 other works.



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Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

June 24, 2018

“Which One Is You?”

(Mark 4:38)

Rev. David K. Groth

“Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” (Mk 4:38).

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

Collect: Almighty God, through John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ, You once proclaimed salvation. Now grant that we may know this salvation and serve You in holiness and righteousness all the days of our life; through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Crossing the sea at night had been his idea. If it can be avoided, no one in the ancient world likes to sail at night. Too much can go wrong, and darkness makes everything more difficult when it does go wrong. (Remember, they didn't have running lights.) Sure enough, just when they get out into the deep water, quote: "a great windstorm arose." Instantly the quiet lake was boiling and heaving and the waves were high and the swells made it very difficult to control the little vessel. Verse 37: "And the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling." Let's be clear. This boat is about to go down.

A boat in a storm is a busy place. Rembrandt captures this in his painting which is on the front cover of your bulletin. Up top, some of the disciples are working with the torn sails. Below them, one is holding on to a rope for dear life, bracing himself for the next wave. A few feet to his right is one who is just sitting there, his back to us. He seems either frozen in fear, or sadly resigned to his fate. Near him is a man leaning over the side, throwing up. One guy is straining hard at the tiller trying to point the boat into the waves. Jesus is in front of him. And in front of Jesus are two men leaning in, shouting at him. They're angry at Jesus. They're angry because Jesus isn't doing anything to help. He's not at the oars or the sails. He's not giving direction or encouragement. They're angry because he's actually been sleeping, underneath the stern platform, on a cushion, Mark carefully noted. How, with the wind and the waves and all that shouting is anybody's guess, but he's been sleeping. They've shaken him awake and are shouting at him. "Teacher, don't you care that we're perishing? How about a little help here!"

In the painting, each of the people with Jesus in the boat has their own reaction to the storm. It's something like the different roles people play in a crisis today; there's a wide variety of dysfunction! Some barely hang on, though they might lose their

grip at any moment. Others become frozen in fear, or sadly resigned to their fate. Some get sick to their stomachs. And, in a crisis, some always get angry at God. “Why won’t you do something? Why are you allowing this to happen to me? I don’t deserve this!”

Notice, in the painting *no one* is looking at Jesus *except* the two that are angry at him. They’re right in his face. “Don’t you care that we’re about to die?” But wait. There is one more, kneeling at Jesus’ feet, looking at him with trust and reverence. I’m afraid you can’t see him, in part because it’s a copy that has been reduced in size and then sent through a Rizzo, and in part because Rembrandt has intentionally hidden him amidst the emotional turbulence of the other disciples. But if you look at photographs of the painting close-up, you’ll see him there at Jesus’ feet, worshiping him with trust and faith. He’s the only disciple to get a little halo painted over his head, and you might be able to make out the halo near Jesus’ feet. Rembrandt’s message? In the great big storms of life, that’s the time to pause, and renew your trust in Jesus. The storms of life are a good time to worship him, pray to him, even praise and thank him, because however bad it is, it could be worse. You could be without a Savior, without the hope of eternal life. It’s the last thing that you’ll want to do, but perhaps the first thing you should do is remember who you are and who he is. All the others in the boat had forgotten. One remembered.

Looking at that painting again, did anyone happen to count the number of people in the boat? In addition to the twelve disciples and Jesus, there is actually a thirteenth person in the boat? Who might that be? Take a look at the disciple looking at us in the blue tunic, holding on to a rope to balance himself. He’s right next to the guy who’s back is facing us. He looks vaguely familiar. He looks suspiciously like a young Rembrandt. Rembrandt sometimes painted himself into his works, and he seems to have done that here. It seems this disciple hasn’t decided yet what his reaction to the storm will be. Will he scream? Will he too yell at Jesus

in anger? Will he pray, praise and give thanks to the Lord? You see what Rembrandt is doing? He's inviting us to find ourselves in the Gospel. Bring your storm into this story, along with all your stress, your sin, your hurts, your hopes, your fears. And then consider your response.

What storm are you in? Is your marriage in trouble? Do you have a child who is old enough to know better? But if there are four good options and one bad, he'll always find the bad one and gravitate towards it. Are there big troubles at work? Or do you find yourself short of breath just walking in from the parking lot? Are you addicted to porn? Or to pain killers? Maybe your anger keeps causing trouble for you; it isolates you.

What personal storm are you in, and how are you dealing with it? Which character in Rembrandt's painting do you identify with? The one who's just holding on for dear life, but may soon lose his grip? The one who's sadly resigned to whatever fate awaits him? The one who's pulling for all his worth at the tiller, but not really able to change the course of the boat? The one who's just sick to his stomach about everything? The one who's angry at God?

Which character in the painting do you identify with? Which character do you want to identify with? (You don't get to be Jesus.) Might it be the unseen disciple with a faint little halo over his head? How will you go about becoming more like him? What changes do you need to make to get there? Whatever the storm, you don't have to go through it alone. Others, myself included, can help. The Stephen Ministers can help. Jesus can help.

You know what happens next in the story. Jesus gets up and addresses the wind and the waves and says, "Quiet! Be still!" Just three little words, but not even a raging sea can resist the Creator when he speaks like that. Before, the text said, "A great windstorm arose." Now the text says, "And there was a great calm." The difference? His word. The sea is now like glass, an instantaneous miracle. Then, turning to his disciples, Jesus asks them, "Why are you so afraid?"

They probably felt defensive. “Well we had good reason to be afraid! In case you didn’t notice the boat was nearly swamped and we were about to go down!” Remember, some of these guys were fishermen. They knew enough about boats and storms and the Sea of Galilee to know when it was time to panic. They knew there were lots of boats resting on the bottom of the sea, along with whatever bits and pieces remained of their crews mixed in with the muck. Of course they were afraid! And yet he seems to think they should not have been frightened by the storm, or even by the prospect of death, the prospect of their bodies disintegrating into the muck. Then Jesus asked, “Have you still no faith?” The disciples thought they had faith, but it wasn’t anything like he wanted it to be. (Makes me wonder what he would say of my faith, and yours.)

That’s one of Mark’s on-going themes, the slowness of the disciples to grasp the true nature of Jesus and his ministry. They had been following him, listening to him. They had seen his miracles. But they were so slow, so resistant to internalize his teaching. They do not yet understand or accept this man is none other than God’s Son, their Savior. Notice, the wind and the waves show a greater recognition of his divine power than do the disciples. In the Bible, the brute forces of nature always obey the Lord’s commands better than his people. Nonetheless, the Lord continues to love and care for us, despite our dullness and doubts and disobedience.

So the disciples still have lots to learn, but they made some progress that night. They learned some things about themselves and about him that night that they didn’t know before, namely that they could trust him, trust him with their lives . . . *and* with their deaths. They learned that in spite of anything that would rage against them, with him they were safe ultimately. And they learned they could rely on his presence. After all, Jesus is in the boat and in the storm with them! The rain is pelting down on him too. His feet and legs are also submerged in the cold water rushing into the boat. He’s also being tossed about in the storm. This is the

hidden miracle in this Gospel story. The Son of the living God is in the boat *with you!* He's in the storm *with you!* Whatever storm it is, however frightening or foul, he's near. Immanuel!

The Christian faith teaches we have a God who doesn't care for us from a distance, a calm corner of heaven, but a God who is with us wherever we are, even in the dark storm.

Did you notice how Rembrandt points us to this ultimate hope? Look at the cross in the painting, pointing at the corners and centered, because the cross is central to our understanding of who Jesus is, and what he came to do. Because of him, and his death, when we die it does not end in oblivion, but in communion; not in black nothingness, but in the bright light; not in the silky muck of the sea bed, but in the highest, brightest heights of the heavens. "The punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed" (Is. 53:5)

That's the one who's in the boat with us, the one who goes to the cross to defeat darkness and death for us. That's the one who will call *us* out of the grave with that authoritative voice that calmed the storm. That's the one who leads us through this earthly life and reunites us one day with glorified bodies and with all the saints of heaven.

St. Francis wrote, "All my life thou hast been at the helm, though very secretly." Can't you say that too? Can't you see how God has been leading you? Can't you see that you've not been drifting randomly through space, but that he's been with you, gently, almost imperceptibly guiding you, like a Shepherd walking with you?

I love what Martin Luther wrote about this text: "If you want to go abroad with Christ, bad weather will not fail to come, and Christ will want to sleep [again]. Then we really feel the temptation. But if He were not sleeping and were to calm the bad weather [too] soon, we would never find out what it means to be a Christian, [to walk by faith and not by sight] and I suppose, would think . . . that we were helping ourselves by our own power. Here, however,

temptation *strengthens* faith. Therefore one must say: No human power was able to help; God alone and His dear Word have done it.”

Mark doesn't tell us, but I bet those disciples breathed a huge sigh of relief after Jesus calmed the storm. It's as if he had just given them their lives back. And maybe they quietly recalled those harrowing moments, and laughed a little at how each of them had reacted in their deep-seeded dysfunctional ways. “Thomas, did I see you feeding the fish back there?” “Don't give me and lip, Peter. I heard you whimpering like a newly weaned baby.”

And as the sun rose, I'll bet they stole a quiet glance at him sitting there in the stern. Mark says, “They were filled with great awe and said to one another, ‘who is this, that even the wind and the waves obey him?’”

He is Jesus, God's Son, Savior. He is the Christ, God's love for you, God's love for us all, from whom nothing, (no storm, not even death itself) can separate us. All praise to him.