

**“We’re All in the Same Boat”**  
**Matthew 8:23-27**  
**Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost**  
**October 28, 2007**

*“Then you called out to God in your desperate condition;  
he got you out in the nick of time.  
He quieted the wind down to a whisper,  
and put a muzzle on all the big waves.  
And you were glad when the storm died down  
and he led you safely back to the harbor.” (Psalm 107:28-30, The Message)*

Let’s begin with a little lesson in art history. There is a remarkable painting by Rembrandt entitled “Christ in the Storm on the Lake of Galilee.” Based upon the text from this morning’s gospel lesson, the 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch artist painted a scene that gives us great insight into the event. First and foremost, it captures everything that the Hebrews of old thought about the sea: a place of great calamity where even the bravest lose heart. The sea is a remnant of that primordial chaos that once covered the earth. To be adrift upon any sea was to be in danger of being swamped by that chaos. Even though the sea in this particular story is actually an inland lake and only covers 7 miles at its widest point, it still represented everything that the Hebrew people feared the most. When a storm arose upon it, as it often did in that vicinity, those fears would be greatly magnified. William Barclay reminds us that the location of the Sea of Galilee, situated within that great rift known as the Jordan Valley, contributed to the suddenness and intensity of the storms. At 680 feet below sea level, it is surrounded by high hills. If and when a cold front pushes through, cool air comes rushing down from those hills and meets the warm air rising from the lake. Sudden and violent thunderstorms are often the result. This, more than likely, was the situation on that fateful night. As the picture shows, the geographic and atmospheric conditions combined for a truly terrifying night. But the day didn’t start out that way.

Jesus had been out and about the Galilean countryside doing some truly remarkable things. Chapter eight begins with the story of how Jesus healed the leper, an act that would have accomplished so much more than just renewed physical health. This man, whose illness made him an outcast, would now be able to rejoin the community of

faith. Jesus then encountered a centurion whose son was very sick. He pleaded with Jesus to heal him even though he—the father—was a gentile, a non-Jew. Jesus did so, demonstrating the power and extending the realm of God's love far beyond the borders of biblical Israel. After that Jesus entered Peter's house and found that the disciple's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever. Jesus responded to the situation and healed her—an action that still baffles most married men today. Now it is important to remember that the disciples had witnessed all of those things and that they heard Jesus say that there was nothing more important than following him. So when Jesus invited the twelve to get in the boat with him and travel to the other side, they responded in what you could call faith. They had seen what Jesus could do and, at the very least, wanted to see what else might occur. And it was shortly after this the storm occurred.

Now if we take another look at the painting, we can see how the artist captured the drama Matthew wanted to present. Rembrandt didn't stop with depicting a simple storm upon this famous sea. This painting is an excellent example of his well-known technique of the contrasting of light and shadow, but not in a way you would expect. Because this is a depiction of a biblical story, you would assume that the brightest light would be upon Jesus the miracle worker, who had just awoken in the stern of the boat. But in this painting, the artist focused the light on the five disciples in the prow who were frantically working to keep it upright. How interesting. Now please remember that many of the men in that boat were fishermen. They probably had spent most of their adult lives plying the waters of this very lake. There was probably not an inch of it they did not know. They had most certainly endured storms before, but apparently not the likes of this one. And from the way that the light is focused in this picture, we can see that they are working scared. All of their efforts are focused upon saving themselves and the others.

Back in 1986, when the Holy Land was in the grips of a terrible drought, archeologists uncovered a boat along the shores of the Sea of Galilee that radio carbon dating determined was built in or around 40 B.C. More than likely it would have been in use in Jesus' day as it fit the description of most fishing boats of that time. It was almost an exact replica of what is found in Rembrandt's painting. The boat was 26 ½ feet long, 7

½ feet wide, and 4 ½ feet high. Just like the painting, it had a place for a square sail on a single mast and space along the walls for four oarlocks. Most of the time, it took only two persons to sail the boat: one to man the rudder and the other to trim the sail. But in Rembrandt's painting there are five disciples desperately trying to keep that boat afloat, indicating the severity of the storm. And while they are at work, all the rest of the disciples in that boat are pleading with the sleeping Jesus to wake up and help them. According to Matthew they cried, "Save us, Lord. We are perishing."

Even though Rembrandt painted this masterpiece some 1600 years after the fact, I have to imagine it was pretty accurate. Matthew's description of the storm indicates that the artist's depiction of five disciples trying to control the boat would not be a stretch. Neither would the image of the seven others pleading with Jesus to wake up and help. After all, they were about to be swamped by the chaotic waters of the sea. Life was threatened. That is when Jesus woke up. He looked at the faces of his disciples, so frightened by what they were experiencing, and asked, "*Why are you afraid, you of little faith?*" Uh-oh! There is that phrase "little faith" again. Many of you probably remember that we talked about "little faith" last week. In Matthew's gospel, it was Jesus' favorite description of the disciples. Despite how it may sound, it wasn't an indication of or a judgment on their lack of faith. Remember that Jesus didn't say, "You of no faith." Neither did he say, "You of bad faith." What he said was "You of little faith." In other words, Jesus recognized that the disciples had some faith. They wouldn't have awakened him if they didn't. That faith may have only been the size of a mustard seed, but they still had it. And remember what Jesus said they could do with that mustard seed-sized faith. They could uproot trees, they could move mountains, they could even, perhaps, survive storms. Perhaps that is one of the messages Rembrandt wanted to convey with this painting. The disciples had used every bit of their own wisdom and experience to try to survive the storm—and rightly so. But I wonder if they had remembered the one thing that had led them to get into the boat in the first place? Because it was only after Jesus reminded them of their little faith that he stood up, rebuked the winds and the waves, and stilled the storm. As a matter of fact, Matthew writes that a great calm descended over the

once raging waters. It became a literal sea of tranquility. Can you imagine the look on the faces of the disciples?

The gospel writer gives us a lot to think about. But the artist gives us even more. Josephus, the great Jewish historian, said that boats such as the one found on the shores of the Sea of Galilee could hold fifteen people. So we know that all twelve of the disciples that accompanied Jesus could have fit in that boat—thirteen people in all. But wait. Rembrandt has painted fourteen people in his depiction of that scene. That's odd. That number doesn't fit with what we know about the story. It is easy to spot Jesus. Then there are the twelve disciples. With some imagination we can make out Peter, John, and James. But who is that fourteenth man, the one with one hand holding tightly onto a mast rope, the other placed on his forehead, and looking straight at us? And why is he in that boat? That puzzled people for years until they started comparing that fourteenth figure with some of Rembrandt's other paintings and realized that it was a self-portrait. Rembrandt had painted himself in that boat. Now isn't that interesting?

Art historians have often debated the role that faith and religion played in the great painter's life. In my reading this week, I couldn't find any clear consensus on whether it did or not. Yet in this painting, it almost is as if Rembrandt is telling us, "Hey, I'm in the same boat as the disciples." I have a feeling that Rembrandt was wrestling with that "little faith" comment of Jesus. I also have a feeling that he was not so much painting a past event as he was a present reality. And I certainly have a feeling that he was onto something that we all should consider this morning. We're all in the same boat, you see. It may not be on the Sea of Galilee or some other body of water, but every one of us know those times when the storms have hit us hard. We find ourselves struggling desperately just to keep our boat afloat amidst the churning, chaotic sea of current events and personal tragedies that threaten to swamp us. When that happens we end up being scared, unsure, and struggling mightily just to keep our heads above the water. When that happens it just doesn't seem fair. After all, we are people who decided to get in the boat with Jesus. And maybe that's where our quest to understand all of this should once again lead us back to the beginning of this story.

For it is there, as I told you earlier, that Matthew reminds us that the twelve got into that boat having just seen Jesus do some quite remarkable things. With them was that good and compassionate healer, who with either a touch or a word returned so many to physical health and spiritual wholeness. With them was the one who had showed them that even Peter's mother-in-law could experience God's love. Oh, the twelve were coming to know that there was something about this man that was worthy of their trust. They were coming to believe that there just might not be anything more important than following him. Why else would they have agreed to go with him to the other side of the sea? Yet in the midst of that trust, and even with him in the boat, a great storm arose—a storm so great that it threatened to undo them. It threw them for a complete loop. It didn't make any sense then, and it certainly doesn't make any sense now. If following Jesus does not keep the storm from occurring, then why should anyone follow?

While we all ponder that question, please notice that the boat wasn't swamped. Please notice that no one fell out. Even though the winds were blowing and the waves were crashing all about them, please notice all twelve of the disciples—and even Rembrandt—were all still in that boat with Jesus. And that simple fact should have led the twelve, and maybe even us, to rethink the whole understanding of faith. I read a part of a book this week entitled Fire of Mercy, Heart of the Word written by an author whose name I won't even attempt to pronounce. In it that author writes some very interesting things about the idea of faith. Listen to what he has to say. *“Faith does not magically create a world of harmony where wishes suddenly come true. Faith does not show illness, perils, hatred, and violence to have been mere illusions. In a sense, faith makes the believer even more keenly aware of the pains these things inflict on body and soul; for, if God is God and if Jesus is here present, how can he let the horrors continue? Faith makes us aware of God's ‘absent presence’ by the very force of the trials faith's self-surrender brings on. The disciples would not be weathering this storm if they had not followed Jesus.”*

I hope you heard that. *“The disciples would not be weathering the storm if they had not followed Jesus.”* That’s an interesting perspective. That author didn’t say that faith brought on the storm. He simply said that faith made them more aware of that which seemed to be a great contradiction: that they were in the midst of the storm even though Jesus was with them. Yet that great contradiction leads us directly to a great promise—one that makes all the difference. It sort of reminds me of what we find in the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews. If you remember, it begins by reminding us that “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” It then goes on with what the Church has come to call “Faith’s Hall of Fame.” The rest of that chapter tells of people like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses who lived their lives by faith. The writer of Hebrews makes it very clear that even though they did have faith, it did not keep them from the hardships of life. Rather, faith enabled them to get through them. The author of Hebrews also describes those who:

*“Suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went around in the skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented...”*

It was not a pretty life, was it? It was not what you would expect for those who had put their trust in Christ. Faith did not give them a pain-free existence, but it did give them the hope they needed to endure that existence. As they heroically struggled against whatever it was they had to face, faith enabled them to find the strength they needed to go on. Why? Because just as with the disciples in the midst of the storm on the Sea of Galilee, it was discovered that Jesus was in the boat with them, just as he is with us. Rembrandt understood it perfectly. We’re all in the same boat, you see. Whether it be walking through the valley of the shadow of death or sailing through the storm on the Sea of Galilee, the one who promised to be with Abraham as he journeyed into the unknown, who promised to be with Moses as he returned to Egypt to face Pharaoh, who promised to be with David as he went out to meet the giant, who promised to be with Elijah as prepared to face the prophets of Baal, who promised to be with Daniel as he was thrown into the lion’s den, who promised to be with Mary as she endured ridicule and rejection,

who promised to be with Jesus as he walked up that lonely hill called Calvary, and who promised to be with the disciples as they went out into the world, also promises to be with us. In the middle of all the winds and waves that we must face, as we struggle mightily against the forces that are threatening to undo us, Jesus is in the boat with us. And on this second Sunday of our annual Stewardship Campaign, as we do everything we can to right the ship, that is just about the best deal that you are ever going to get.