

Frightening Times, Faithful God
Reading from the Old Testament: Isaiah 55:10-11
Reading from the Gospels: Mark 4:35-41

Unpacking the English language can be a most vexing exercise. Just discerning the meaning of *mean* would make a Russian interpreter swear. What is the definition of *mean*? Could it be to: convey; symbolize; produce; predestine; possess significance; or portend? Yes ... all of the above. But wait, could *mean* also be defined as: cheap; greedy; nasty; malevolent; squalid; poor; marvelous; virtuoso; average; median; lowly; or masterful? Yes ... all of the above.

English is quirky. Consider this - On Thursday morning, the sky was a brilliant blue, the sun was bright, and the breeze was cool. The flowers continued to bloom, and yet Spring's yellow haze had dissipated. The birds sang. The milk was cold, and the cereal was poured from that blessed middle of the box, meaning that the bowl held an ideal balance of whole grain flakes, chewy covered raisins, and almonds. You could say it was a perfect morning.

Yet, imagine if the day had dawned differently: The raw cold of a late winter downpour; the gym is shut down for repairs, your

head is clogged, your sciatica is raging, your kid's grade card is so bad the principal wants to frame it for the shrine in her office she calls The Hall of Shame; your spouse ran off with the plumber; your employer has just downsized you; your credit card's been hacked; the milk is spoiled; the cereal is the bottom of the box dregs; and you think you may have a kidney stone.

So, why is it that we would refer to that sort of morning as a *perfect storm*? There is nothing perfect about it. We can all put flesh on bad days, hard days, rotten days, nightmare days, and yet when calamity comes at us from the four corners of our lives, leaving no stone unturned or unravaged, we call it a *perfect storm*. Thus, we go from rain to lightning, to thunder, to derecho, to tornado, to hurricane, to perfect? That makes as much sense to me as someone describing their day as a lovely enema. Perfect storm, isn't it an oxymoron?

The National Severe Storms Laboratory divides storms into several categories. There are single and multi-cell thunderstorms, squall line storms, bow echo storms, mesoscale convective complex storms, mesoscale convective vortex storms, derecho windstorms, and of course, the celebrity of the storm family, that star of the Weather

Channel and Storm Chasers, the supercell, that inexorable, highly organized storm feeding off an updraft that is tilted and rotating, up to 10 miles wide and up to 50,000 feet tall, delivering to your neighborhood violent winds, savage tornadoes, torrential downpours, fierce hail, and maybe all the above in a span of time briefer than the first inning of a baseball game. Flatlanders know the familiar sight of supercells way off in the distance. The sight is both glorious and terrible at the same time. You cannot not stare at it as it swallows the landscape in its path. You know it is methodically beating a path to your door, but the wisdom of sheltering or fleeing, at least momentarily, cannot snap you out of the bewitched trance into which the massive weather monster draws you.

And what of hurricanes and cyclones, typhoons and tsunamis, those various unmanageable moods of bipolar seas? When the storm blows in, the last place I want to be is in a boat. I'll see those human-interest stories of teens or billionaire middle-aged adolescents embarking on solo journeys across the Atlantic, and I'm thinking, "Are you loopy? There be monsters and skyscraper swells out there!"

Poets and novelists know the storm, any storm, offers a powerful image for the supple mind, because it is so reflective of the primordial chaos out of which Creation emerged. In Genesis, we read, "the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters." That's an image made more for Edvard Munch than Norman Rockwell. An all-encompassing watery chaos from which life sprang, and at the same time, the dark, life-swallowing deep that is the repository of all our fears.

The Psalmist speaks of Leviathan, the metaphor-rich sea monster that represents Israel's great fears. "Here is the sea, great and wide, which teems with creatures innumerable, living things both small and great. There go the ships, and Leviathan, which you formed to play in it." Job adds to the image: Leviathan, he says, "makes the deep boil like a pot."

The storms offer echoes of the primordial watery chaos and the threats that sport there. As such, a storm is a true to life image of the various trials and traumas that roll into our lives. The great Reformer, Martin Luther, said, "The human heart is like a ship on a stormy sea

driven about by winds blowing from all four corners of heaven." And on the land, Abraham Lincoln offered similar reflection, I pass my life in preventing the storm from blowing down the tent, and I drive in the pegs as fast as they are pulled up."

Those are sentiments that you have known or will know. The sail-whipping moods of adolescent infatuation; the lit match in a parched woodland variety of combustible evenings so common in the homes of couples who weighed looks over personality types when their eyes met across a crowded room; the shipwreck of a toxic workplace; the thunderclaps in your brain when your body's betrayal is revealed in an x-ray; the Dow's deadly wind shear going to work on your 401K; family reunion anxieties and squalls; the tornado child; the perpetual rain of depression; the oppressive humidity of stress; the lightning strike of tragedy; the waves of grief — the inventory of potential life storms could fill the old Sears Wish Book.

You may have never stepped in a boat, but you know what it is to sail right into a storm. When the storm comes, how will you react? What will you do? Who will you trust? Apart from those storm-chasing

adrenaline junkies, we typically don't go looking for storms, but we have a way of running into them if they don't find us first.

Teachers will appreciate this, Jesus had spent the whole day giving lessons to an audience whose collective glassy-eyed gaze made evident that they were either not getting it or had already checked out mentally, their imaginations having lured their mind's eye to playgrounds where surfboards swoosh, baseballs clear fences, or malls are shopped. So, for some unrevealed reason Jesus organizes an evening boat trip on the Galilean Sea. Was he worried about making an appointment on the other side, or was he hoping to melt the day's frustrations away on a relaxing evening cruise? There were enough people to sign up that they formed a little flotilla of boats as they sailed away from Galilee's shore.

And here is where the text raises a question for me. Jesus wasn't a boater, sailor, jet skier, or admiral. Jesus was a carpenter. Yes, he could walk on water, which is a pretty neat trick, but what does Jesus know about boating? Before Bethlehem, was Jesus taking notes up there in heaven with God at the chalkboard? "Okay Jesus, this is the aft and that is the stern. And remember, always remember, respect the boom."

No, Jesus was a carpenter. Perhaps he could help build the boat, but sailing it is a whole other enterprise. So, on this trip, the trip Jesus requested, he is not at the wheel, but is a passenger, and a sleepy one at that.

Yet we know there were at least four experienced seamen on board. Peter, Andrew, James, and John had all cut their teeth on the sea. Their lives were centered on the water. As fishermen, the sea was to them as a basketball is to Steph Curry, an extension of their bodies. They knew the tides, the shoals, the wind patterns, the weather cycles, the best ways to navigate the sea traffic, the places you could dock without getting stuck when the tide went out.

So, I'm wondering, as experienced seamen, did they have any premonition that this night was not a good one for a boat ride? Could they see the dark, storm front in the distance? Could they feel the wind shifting? Did they have misgivings about the wisdom of setting sail, or were they wary of telling the charismatic miracle worker that his plan was a bad idea? Did the sailor sense what the rabbi could not? The snoring made it obvious that Jesus wasn't worried in the least.

Yet out they went, and it wasn't long before they were metaphorically and literally in over their heads. Naval veterans will recall memories of trying to navigate through fifty-foot swells, when the crews on even the larger navy vessels find themselves on a white-knuckle, green gilled, sphincter tightening, say your prayers kind of ride. Mark tells us, "A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped."

Experienced seafarers, through training and experience learn to navigate their craft in a wide variety of weather conditions, but a seafarer knows better than most how tiny they are in the face of nature's fury. Peter, Andrew, James, and John, the salty seafaring anglers quickly realize they have exhausted their toolboxes, so it's will-signing, call in the kids, too late for hospice time. It's not just in foxholes that desperate prayers are lifted. Mark says, "they woke Jesus up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" It's almost an echo from the Old Testament narrative of Jonah, where the reluctant prophet takes the redeye to Tarshish instead of pursuing the thankless assigned work in Nineveh. As with our story, we have a

raging storm, a sleeping passenger, and a similarly freaked out ship's crew.

"Such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up ... Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep. The captain came and said to him, "What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish."

Jonah winds up in the belly of a fish, but Jesus wakes up, does his Jesus thing, and the sea immediately calms. A fascinating story if we were just to leave it there with the disciples' panic addressed with calm, But I'm drawn here to Jesus' response to his disciples. Jesus asks them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

It strikes me here that Jesus isn't poking them with the old hectoring, "Oh ye of little faith." Rather, aware of the disciples continued opacity, it seems one could read this as if Jesus is genuinely trying to understand their unabated confusion. He genuinely wants to understand, "Why are you afraid?" He's not intending to just slam their slowness or weakness. He's not telling them to suck it up and put on

their big boy pants. Jesus actually wants to understand their fears.

"Why are you afraid?"

I am comforted by Jesus' question. Rather than questioning our faithfulness, Jesus wants to understand our fears. Author Michael Lindvall offers the image of a child waking at night after a bad dream, plagued with those real childhood fears of things that go bump in the night. A parent hears their cry and stumbles down the hall half-asleep to the child's room, picks the toddler up and strokes the child's sweating brow close to their chest. (Michael Lindvall, *Feasting on the Word*)

What does the parent say in trying to calm the child? Usually, something like "You're okay." And what do we follow this up with? "There's nothing to be afraid of." Truth is, however, that neither of these assurances are necessarily accurate. The child's reality at this point is that everything is **definitely not** okay. The child's perception is that their world is under threat. So, to rebuff their fear is to cast doubt on their faculties. And how disingenuous is it to tell a child there is nothing to fear in this world? Even the president is handed a binder every day that is filled with frightful threats.

Perhaps, the better strategy with the frightened child and your freaked out self is God's word to us in the incarnation of Christ: I am with you. What is it you fear? Let's look at ways to face it together.

The Psalmist exults, "By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance, O God of our salvation; you are the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas ... You silence the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, the tumult of the peoples." And elsewhere, the psalmist says, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam."

There are real storms out there that our boats will not be able to avoid, but into and through the storm there is One who goes with us. I am with you. What is it you fear? Let's look at ways to face it together.

In John Bunyan's classic text, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the book ends with an important image for us. The main character, *Christian*, represents our daily struggle to lead a life of faith. Near the end of his journey, he must cross a wide, dangerous river and he is desperately

afraid. Together with his friend Hopeful, they wade into the waters warily. Christian cries out, "I sink in deep Waters; the Billows go over my head, all His waves go over me." Hopeful replies with a message of immense grace, "Be of good cheer, my Brother, I feel the bottom, and it is good..." (John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*)

When Christ came to earth, it was God's way of saying, I am with you. What is it you fear? Let's look at ways to face it together. Amen.