



## **Faith in the Storm**

### **Matthew 8:18-27**

Rev. Thomas G. James

Washington Street UMC

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The season of Lent was instituted by the early church as a time of preparation for the Easter celebration. It is a designated season of 40 days of penitential preparation; a season to acknowledge our need for new life. It is a season of imitation, as we remember Christ's 40 days in the wilderness, preparing him for his ministry of teaching and healing, leading up to his death, burial, and resurrection.

As we journey through Lent, we will be looking at the stark contrast between the faith of Jesus, and the faith (or lack thereof) of his disciples. In our own call to repentance, the season will invite us to consider the spaces in our lives where we lack faith, where we fail to trust in the promise of God, and where we are in need of Christ's faith to sustain our own.

Today, our scripture gives us an introduction to the kind of faith Jesus desires of his followers. Before we get to the storm on the sea, we see that Jesus is calling his disciples to follow him with unwavering devotion. Jesus has been gathered with the disciples and an interested crowd in Capernaum, on the Northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. In Capernaum, Jesus had healed many in the community who were sick, or possessed with evil spirits. He was beginning to make a name for himself as more than just an interesting rabbi, but was seen with intrigue as a miracle worker. As the crowds gathered around him, Jesus gives this order in verse 18 to "go to the other side."

If we jump ahead to verse 28, we find that the place they are going – "the other side" – is to the country of the Gadarenes, which is on the Southeast shore of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus is directing them to go about as far around the Sea as they can go – into a different region, outside the boundaries of Samaria and Galilee, to the area of Gadara. Today, it would be an instruction to travel from Israel to Jordan – it is a wholly different land.

Perhaps the distance and significance of the travel is what leads the following exchanges. A scribe, who we later hear defined as one of the disciples, approaches Jesus and offers, "Teacher (or Rabbi), I will follow you wherever you go."

This is a pretty significant promise, the depths of which the scribe probably does not yet comprehend. To acknowledge just how deep this promise is, Jesus responds, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Jesus is making clear that to follow him is no easy undertaking. This is a wandering life – a nomadic existence – a reality for one who has no home. Jesus offers, "You cannot stay home and follow me."<sup>i</sup>

For the one born in Bethlehem, raised in Nazareth to Mary and Joseph, Jesus indicates he no longer has a home. Unlike the foxes and birds, there is no place to return to that could be seen as “home.” To the one who says, “I will follow you,” Jesus offers this defined invitation: to follow me means you shouldn’t get too comfortable. This invitation is only further defined as another disciple comes and asks for a pardon from this first journey across the Sea of Galilee.

“Another of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, first let me go and bury my father.’”<sup>ii</sup> “The burial of a parent was one of the highest duties in Jewish society, taking precedence over many other obligations dictated by the Mosaic law.”<sup>iii</sup> This is not a small obligation, and in accordance with the ancient law, the disciple is right to request such an excused absence from the soon departing ship. But Jesus responds to him, “Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.”

I’ve often thought this was one of Jesus’ least empathetic moments. It’s not like the disciple was asking to go and attend the burial of a second cousin thrice removed. This isn’t *any* family funeral. This is the disciple’s *father*: the patriarch of the house in a system that is governed by patriarchy. Yet, in what is one of the first clear departures from the ancient Mosaic law, Jesus doesn’t seem to be impressed with the need to attend a family funeral. “Jesus insists that following him must take precedence over even the highest of family responsibilities.”<sup>iv</sup>

As they prepare to board the ship to cross the Sea, Jesus makes it clear, “This commitment [(the commitment to follow him)] overrides all other allegiances and all claims to ease. One must be willing to give up ‘home and security and even family obligations’ – to leave it all behind and cross over to the other side.”<sup>v</sup> Before they even board the ship, Jesus has laid it all bare: this invitation, this commitment, this path of discipleship is not one that comes without some personal sacrifice. As Jesus says elsewhere in the gospels, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.”<sup>vi</sup> It will not be a clean and easy path, but it is the path of invitation, and we are left to believe the disciples got on board ... literally. The very next verse doesn’t offer any further debate on the funeral, but simply says, “And when [Jesus] got into the boat, his disciple followed him.”

As they take the boat across the Sea, a trip that would be less than 15 miles, we’re told that a great storm arose on the lake, “so great that the boat was being swallowed by the waves.” Jesus must have been exhausted from his time in Capernaum, because in what should be a relatively short trip, an excursion that wouldn’t have taken more than a couple hours, in the midst of a storm so great that the boat is being swallowed up, Jesus has managed to fall asleep. It’s an image that stands in stark contrast to what one would expect in such a storm.

One of my all-time favorite movies is *Forrest Gump*. Perhaps I am biased because I’m from Georgia, and I’ve been to the landmark bench in Savannah where Tom Hanks spent a great deal of the movie telling his story over a box of chocolates, but I think it’s a great movie. One of the best scenes of the movie is where Forrest and Lieutenant Dan are out at sea on their shrimping boat when the hurricane swallows their boat. It’s just the two of them on the boat, trying to

survive as the waves reach higher and higher with each hurricane force gust of wind. As Forrest is at the helm, doing everything he can to keep from falling off the boat and keeping the boat from tipping over in the giant waves, Lt. Dan is in the crow's nest, atop the tallest of the masts. Lt. Dan, while facing the ripping rain and the near destruction of their ship, cries out in a defiant rant toward God, "You call this a storm? Is this all you've got?!?"

Perhaps the disciples could have benefitted from having Lt. Dan aboard their ship. The disciples did not have the will to die like Lt. Dan. Instead of screaming to God, "Is this all you got? You call this a storm?" they scream to Jesus, "Why are you sleeping? Save us, for we are surely to perish!"

As Jesus responds, he seems rather burdened to have been awoken from his slumber. In what seems to come across in a salty sailor's tone, Jesus responds, "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?" "The disciples fear for their lives, so they wake Jesus, believing that he can act on their behalf. Jesus rebukes them, not because they wake him, but because they are afraid."<sup>vii</sup> The rest of the story offers further affirmation that Jesus is not just an ordinary rabbi, but that like the power shown in the healing miracles in Capernaum, Jesus is seen to have power to rebuke the wind and the sea, and to bring the sea to a dead calm. The disciples are amazed, asking themselves, "What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?"

I think this story offers a great witness to Jesus' connection to the power of God in the command Jesus has over the sea, but I think we are too quick to focus this story on the miraculous response of Christ. When we focus on the command Jesus has over the sea, we move too quickly past the rebuke of Christ as he is woken from his slumber. It might be offered that this text demonstrates that "Survival amid the crashing waves is possible only by calling on the mastermind, 'Lord, save [us]! We are perishing.'"<sup>viii</sup> But when we focus on the way Jesus responds to save the disciples from capsizing the boat, we fail to hear the rebuke Jesus has to offer about faithfulness.

The disciples, in their fear amidst the storm, are not rebuked by Jesus for a lack of belief that Jesus could save them in the midst of the storm. Jesus isn't disappointed that they awoke him because they believed he had the power to save them. If anything, Jesus should have offered them an affirmation of praise, for they knew where to turn when they thought they were incapable of saving themselves. But this is not the case; when Jesus is awoken from his nautical nap, his response is to rebuke them for not having faith – for letting their lack for faith lead them down a path of great fear.

In this rebuke, we find that Christ is contrasting the disciples lack of faith amidst the storm with his own faith, which allowed him to be peacefully resting, even as the ship seemed so close to despair. Instead of moving on to acknowledge Christ's proven ability to save us when we are incapable of saving ourselves, I think it's worth asking, what lack of faith is Jesus calling out among the disciples?

Is Jesus calling out the disciples lack of faith that God would maintain steadfast in the covenant? The Hebrew Scriptures are full of examples where God rebukes the covenanted people of Israel for their lack of trust that God would remain steadfast in providing care, sustenance, and life for the community of faith. Is this just another witness to how, though God has promised eternal providence for the creation that God called “good,” we, the created, continue to doubt God’s faithfulness? Is the disciples’ act of waking up Jesus amid the crashing waves just another witness to the fall of Adam and Eve in the garden, where-in they ate of the fruit of the tree of knowledge because they wanted the power of God in their own hands? Is Jesus’ reprimand of the disciples on the deck of the boat just one more example of how we, God’s created, God’s covenanted people, the ones who God has promised to sustain and support, fail to trust that God is God? Is Jesus disappointed that once again, we showed a belief that God is less-than who God has been declared to be by the witness of centuries of the community of the faithful?

Or, is Jesus’ rebuke more personal? Is Jesus disappointed that this ship full of fisherman lack a belief in their own knowledge and skill to save this ship amidst the storm? Not that Jesus and the disciples spent a lot of time at sea, but Jesus hand-selected this group of disciples from a fishing community. Some of the disciples were called to follow Jesus while they were on the Sea of Galilee fishing – literally called from their boat to follow him. It’s not like this group lacks the knowledge of how to survive amidst a stormy day on the water; surely this isn’t their first time in rough waters. Is Jesus rebuking their lack of trust in who God has created them to be? Who God has gifted them to be? Who God has empowered them to be?

Perhaps the rebuke is a mixture of both – a fear that we are not good enough, and a lack of faith that God will stand by us in the midst of such trying times.

In contrast, in a witness to faithfulness, Jesus gives us the example of true faith. In this story, Jesus shows he trusts that, in the face of great despair, God will not lead them to destruction. God will deliver them, even through the greatest of challenges. And Christ shows a greater faith in the disciples than the disciples showed in themselves. Christ knew he had a group that was capable of sailing in the midst of great storms, and rebukes them for not trusting themselves in the midst of turmoil – trusting who God has created and gifted them to be.

Many scholars say this story is a rebuke on the church itself. They offer, “the church, like the disciples’ boat, is the ark of safety in a storm-tossed sea. [When the sea gets too great], Our temptation is to try to row to shore to escape the storm, but when we do so we fail to witness to the one who is peace.”<sup>ix</sup> I agree the story offers a rebuke of the church, but I believe it does so without calling us skip the rebuke of Jesus and to jump to our acknowledgement of the glory of Christ.

I think the story invites us to consider the nature of who we are as the church: a body called “to remind each other that while God may be so much bigger than we’d thought, and that while the life of faith may be at times much harder than we’d bargained for, God will not abandon us.”<sup>x</sup> Our gathering as the people of God is an invitation to remember that God is God, and that God

is no less than God. As we proclaim that God is God, we are also reminded that we are who God created us to be. We are “fearfully and wonderfully made,”<sup>xi</sup> and part of our call as the church is to build each other up, to acknowledge our part in the body of Christ – as part of the community of faith – which is sustained by God to proclaim God’s glory in all the world.

Friends, we need not fear, nor question our faith in God, for Christ proclaims and gives witness to the glory of God. When our love fails, God’s love remains steadfast. When our faith is found lacking, the faith of Jesus Christ stands as our witness and our strength. In this season of Lent, let us be reminded, that in our fear and faithlessness, we have been gifted with a witness of trust and faithfulness in the person of Jesus Christ. In the glory of God, we are promised new life – abundant life – and eternal life. Receive this good news, and have courage amidst the storms of life. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Stanley Hauerwas. *Matthew: Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006.

<sup>ii</sup> NRSV. Matthew 8:21.

<sup>iii</sup> Douglas R. A. Hare. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Matthew*. Louisville; Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

<sup>iv</sup> Hare.

<sup>v</sup> Anna Case-Winters. *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible: Matthew*. Louisville; Westminster John Knox Press, 2015.

<sup>vi</sup> NRSV. Luke 14:26.

<sup>vii</sup> Hauerwas.

<sup>viii</sup> Hare.

<sup>ix</sup> Hauerwas.

<sup>x</sup> David Lose. [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org). Retrieved February 26, 2020.

<sup>xi</sup> NRSV. Psalm 139:14.