

Sermon Text for October 15, 2023

By Rev. Dr. Michael Wilson – Guest Minister

“The Calm and the Storm”

Jeremiah 33: 19-26

¹⁹The word of the LORD came to Jeremiah: ²⁰“This is what the LORD says: ‘If you can break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, so that day and night no longer come at their appointed time, ²¹then my covenant with David my servant—and my covenant with the Levites who are priests ministering before me—can be broken and David will no longer have a descendant to reign on his throne. ²²I will make the descendants of David my servant and the Levites who minister before me as countless as the stars in the sky and as measureless as the sand on the seashore.’”

Have you been to the shore? Down the ocean? What we say – down the shore? That NJ. Down the ocean – MD. I don’t know which one is for PA and DE!

²³The word of the LORD came to Jeremiah: ²⁴“Have you not noticed that these people are saying, ‘The LORD has rejected the two kingdoms^[a] he chose’? So they despise my people and no longer regard them as a nation. ²⁵This is what the LORD says: ‘If I have not made my covenant with day and night and established the laws of heaven and earth, ²⁶then I will reject the descendants of Jacob and David my servant and will not choose one of his sons to rule over the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. For I will restore their fortunes^[a] and have compassion on them.’”

Matthew 8: 23-27

Jesus Calms the Storm

²³Then he got into the boat and his disciples followed him. ²⁴Suddenly a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. ²⁵The disciples went and woke him, saying, “Lord, save us! We’re going to drown!”

²⁶He replied, “You of little faith, why are you so afraid?” Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm.

²⁷The men were amazed and asked, “What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!”

What you believe about God affects how you relate to God – judgmental God – trying to please, gracious God – running towards

Your relationship with God affects what you believe about yourself – harsh God – harsh people, loving God – loving people

What you believe about yourself affects your choices in life – gracious and powerful God – confidence even in the midst of the challenges of life!

So Christians needs to have a comprehensive, deep, wonderful, robust, sense of who God is!

Let us pray...

With that in mind – two Scripture passages this morning.

First, Jeremiah. Then Jesus in the gospel of Matthew

Jeremiah

Matthew

We're in Matthew – learning righteousness. Ways of being right – with ourselves, with one another, with God. Note – it is not ways of being self-righteous. It is ways of being righteous. And we get this story - This is a great story – a great story. On the surface, a comforting story. There is a storm; there is fear – just like many of our lives or all of our lives at some point – filled with storms and fear. This storm gets calmed and the people who are afraid move from fear to awe. That's a great story.

And it's a great story when it happens in our lives. When life is stormy, we are afraid, and then things work out. That's a great story!

But I want to say to you right up front – that isn't all there is to this story. What is on the surface it is true and it is great, but it isn't complete. It isn't complete until we start talking about the broader questions of – not just little storms into our lives like I can't find a parking spot or my spouse is irritating me – until we start talking about pandemics and injustice and now war – in a number of spots across our globe – we're not doing this story justice. Until we start talking about the storms that don't get calmed – at least as quickly as we would have hoped. And until we talk about their response – which centers there lives – and our lives - fully and completely on Jesus Christ no matter what is happening in our lives – we haven't gotten to the heart of this story. And the story of our lives. It starts by acknowledging the disruptions that come into our lives – all the time and in so many ways.

Another way to put it – righteousness begins not with getting it all together. That would be self-righteousness. Righteousness begins when we know that all is not together – in us, around us. In the world. It begins with disruption.

Jeremiah is writing in a time when God's people are wondering about their future. What had happened is that they thought God's promises were that their cities and homes would stay the same – in the same place, with the same people. They thought life would continue the same – and would be good. And then a conquering army showed up and took some of them away. Not all of them. Life was disrupted. And Jeremiah comes with these words.

Read some from Jeremiah...

Only they are not ancient words. They are words to life disrupted – to people who have a global pandemic upon them. To people who are grappling with a national reckoning about racism. To a world racked with war in the Ukraine. And now the Middle East. To people who have received dire news about their health – or a relationship or a job. To congregations for whom worship attendance is not what is once was – and who wonder about the future. Words about who God is to life disrupted.

Cherry Springs Park – dark sky park – darkest sky east of the Mississippi!

More love than the stars of the sky. That love might seem obscured, of course. But obscured is not absent. It is obscured – still there, still working

For them – that care is obscured. But they are trying to believe it is there.

Against that backdrop – Jesus arrives. He ministers. He heals. They expect great things - -on their terms. Then they get a storm – which is not on their terms.

There is nothing like a huge storm rolling in when you are out-of-doors. See it coming, Temperature drops. My wife is from Iowa – the sky turns green. It's flat – the storm is coming.

The calming of the storm on the sea of Galilee is a classic example of the power of Christ over Nature. It makes clear in a demonstrable way the fact that Jesus was Lord over all creation as well as Lord of the Church. He who set the planets in motion and placed the stars in the heavens, who created the very laws of Nature which govern the universe, had authority over those laws and could speak a word and all creation would respond to His command.

Jesus had given orders to His disciples to go over to the other side of the lake (the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee), and together they had gotten in a boat to travel there. Tired and exhausted from the exacting tasks of the day -- teaching and healing, responding to the offers of the scribe and the reluctant disciple -- Jesus was in the stern of the boat, and He fell asleep on a cushion.

Suddenly, a violent storm erupted and waves began to crash against the boat, splashing over the sides. The geographic location of the Sea of Galilee makes it particularly susceptible to sudden and violent storms.

Maybe that is why Jesus chose his ministry there – because Life is particularly susceptible to sudden and violent storms.

All the while, Jesus was asleep in the stern of the boat. The disciples became so alarmed at the situation that they woke Him, and they asked, "Lord, save us! We're going to drown!" At this Jesus rebuked the wind, and He spoke to the waves. The result was that the wind and the waves died down, and it was completely calm. The sovereign Lord spoke, and His creation immediately responded. The storm is calmed.

Some people will say that if you have storms in your life, your faith isn't what it should be. I don't think that is entirely accurate. I believe that if you have storms in your life, it is because you are a human, and we all have storms. The question is much more about how we are in the storm than whether or not there will be a storm.

The disciples had Jesus in the boat with them, but they still had a very dangerous storm. And, just because we have Jesus with us does not mean we won't have storms, too.

James 1:2 actually say that – Whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy. Not if. Not even when – but whenever. It's like Matthew, and James are saying – it is going to happen. Trials are going to happen. And they will happen more than once. Another way to put it is to say that we should consider it a joy each time we have a storm in our lives. He didn't say, IF we have storms.

there are those getting ready to enter a storm; those currently in the middle of a storm; and those just

getting out of a storm.

Even Christians fit into one of those categories. There might be some here today that are experiencing a torrential downpour in their lives, and they might be wondering if their boat is going to finally sink. Those who are going, “Thanks God,” and those who are going – seems pretty calm right now...

Luke writing to Mediterranean Christians – different places, etc.

Raises the question – how are you going to be in the storm – not whether we will avoid, because we won’t, but how we will act.

Can you remain calm in the storm – if you know that storms happen and that Jesus is more powerful than the storm – can you remain calm?

The claim is that faith means that looking out of the boat – Jesus is bigger than this storm!

We have a choice when we are afraid.

What happens when the storm doesn’t stop? What happens when Jesus doesn’t calm the storm? If the passage establishes that Jesus can calm the storm – what do we say when he doesn’t?

To put that concretely -- some of you have been down to New Orleans after Katrina. Or, speaking of the shore – over to the Jersey shore after Superstorm Sandy. . And yes, Hurricane Katrina did stop. Sandy isn’t rolling over the ocean right now. We’re in the storm of a pandemic. I don’t know where we are in that storm. For some it keeps on going. We keep waiting for it to end. Or to move us to a “new normal” that actually has some stability. That will happen. But only after doing a lot of damage. What do we say to the people who prayed while that storm was going on – Jesus, please make this stop? Or to the families that lost homes.

And what do we say to people who have prayed for the life or health of a loved one, only to place them in the ground – or those who have prayed for a job to work only to get let go?

Not enough faith? Not enough clean living?

Matthew doesn’t answer this question here. We need to acknowledge that. Here the storm stops. And Jesus stops storms. And when we are in storms, we should ask Jesus to stop the storm. And sometimes he stops the storm.

But not always. Not even for himself. There is where we need to answer firmly those who would say – see, the evil of the world proves that God either isn’t loving or isn’t powerful enough to deal with it. No

– the point of the Christian story isn't the God has magically made all the storms go away. It is that he has triumphed over any storm by entering it, bearing it, and rendering it powerless over the final outcome.

There is a reason that we hang crosses in our sanctuaries. And there is a reason those crosses are empty.

Another way to put this is to talk about what we mean when we say that Jesus descended into hell

Thomas Aquinas – Jesus traveled into hell to rescue the great figures of ancient Israel and carry them up to heaven.

Luther – military siege on hell to defeat the devil – a triumphant march after Jesus death.

Calvin, though, said that this referred to the “suffering in his soul the terrible torments of a condemned and forsaken person”

Deepest storms that we experience – Jesus has experienced.

Jesus has the right to stand with us in the storm – even when we don't understand why it won't stop.

Jurgen Moltmann – the crucified God

It is an astounding, amazing saying – that God has become one of us – truly one of us. Not just by walking around with us – but by entering into our pain and sorrow and suffering – by showing solidarity in our weakness.

Certainly, I invite you to call upon Jesus in the storm, but also do not be discouraged if he does not always make the storm go away.

Let me point out – they are afraid before this happens. They are afraid and in awe after it happens. This is not so much a comforting experience for them.

“It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

Yes – storms come into every life. Yes, Jesus can (and does calm those storms).

But he doesn't calm all of them.

And even when he does, then we find ourselves in the presence of the One who is more powerful than a hurricane and more mighty than a tornado.

I am told that during the years 1014-1035 there ruled over England a Danish king named Canute. King Canute tired of hearing his retainers flatter him with extravagant praises of his greatness, power and invincibility.

Canute had learned that his flattering courtiers claimed he was "So great, he could command the tides of the sea to go back".

To him the words were exaggerated. They amounted to playing in shallow water and pretending to be able to control the ocean. He ordered his chair to be set down on the seashore, where he commanded the waves not to come in and wet him. No matter how forcefully he ordered the tide not to come in, however, his order was not obeyed. Soon the waves lapped around his chair. The water was real, the water was deep, the water responded to a different force, and Canute could do nothing about it. One historian tells us that, therefore, he never wore his crown again, but hung it on a statue of the crucified Christ.

This is appropriate, for whereas the Danish King could not control the deep waters, Jesus could. Jesus can control the deep waters and the mighty winds that stir them to frenzy. The Old Testament speaks accurately when it says "He calms the storm, So that its waves are still," and "He stirs up the sea with His power, And by His understanding He breaks up the storm." (See Psalm 107:29; Job 26:12.)

"Let all men know how empty and worthless is the power of kings. For there is none worthy of the name but God, whom heaven, earth and sea obey".

So spoke King Canute the Great, the legend says, seated on his throne on the seashore, waves lapping round his feet.

I want to suggest to you that at its root, but this story is about the power of God – and our response to that. Will we still cling to notions of control, or will we acknowledge God, whom the heaven, earth, and sea obey.

Yes, the storms come. Yes the storms go. Yes, sometimes they even overwhelm. But the most important thing we discover through them is that God is God, and we are not. Then you are righteous. Not self-righteous. Simply righteous. And calm.

Amen.