

Proper 7YB 2024

Who is Afraid of the Calm?  
By the Rev. Salying Wong

It was the most wretched night. It all began when Jesus said he wanted to cross the Sea of Galilee, but right at dusk, when the sun would set in half an hour. We raised our eyebrows, but we didn't argue. We were still mulling the parable he just taught, about someone who went to sleep and woke up to a harvest. Well, that evening, when we boarded the boat, Jesus himself went to sleep on a cushion at the stern, and all we harvested was terror.

At first, it was pleasant enough. Other boats joined us. Jesus napped. But, as the sun dipped below the horizon, the wind started to blow. Then the waves began to swell and we clung to the side of the boat as we tossed and landed on the waves with a thud, as if hitting hard ground. Peter vomited over the side of the boat. The rest of us were getting green. But the sickness was immediately washed away by sheer panic, as the wind began to howl like a banshee and the waters began to rage like a succubus. The waves towered over us like cedars; they rushed down at us like falling trees. We reeled about and staggered like drunkards. We screamed like we were insane. Water swamped the boat. We had nothing with us, no bucket to bail with. It was as if the wind and the water were demons vowing to destroy us.

And can you believe it, the whole time, Jesus was sleeping! Infuriated, we shook him awake, and cried, "Teacher, don't you care that we are dying!"

He rubbed the sleep from his eyes, looked around as if noticing for the first time the wind and the water. He got up and rebuked the wind and the water gruffly, "Be still! Shut up!" Suddenly, all around us was a dead calm.

He rebuked the banshee wind and the succubus water just as he rebuked the other demons—you know, like his first exorcism in the synagogue, when

the demon yelled, “I know who you are, Jesus of Nazareth. Have you come to destroy us?” Jesus said the same thing then, “Shut-up!” We had seen powerful people cast out demons in people. But this, the waters, the wind—this was cosmic, this was creation, this only *God* could command!

And then got goosebumps all over our flesh. We murmured beneath our breath, “Who is this that even the wind and waters obey him?” We were filled with a great fear, a fear greater than the one we experienced in the storm, if you can believe that. This time, we were afraid of Jesus. As he moved closer to us, we backed away. We almost jumped out of the boat.

Jesus asked us, “Why are you afraid? Where is your faith? Do you still not have it?”

I know what you’re thinking. Shouldn’t we have been overjoyed that we were saved from the storm. Shouldn’t the sermon be about how Jesus calms the storms within. But, have you ever been in the boat and witnessed such an act of divine power? There is something to the phrase, “the fear of the Lord.”

It’s been many years now since that night on the lake. This is what I can say, after years of wrestling with my faith. Faith has a variety of forms. For some people, it is easy. They don’t need evidence. Like the woman who hemorrhaged and touched Jesus’ hem and was healed. Her faith preceded her healing. That sort of faith is astounding to me. Mine is hard to come by. Though I say I desire evidence, evidence doesn’t lead me to faith. Consider the calming of the storm. When I saw what Jesus did, how he could command the wind and the water, I and my companions were filled with a great fear.

For me, faith is agonizingly slow: I have to follow the questions: who is this that can command the waters and the wind? Who is this that can proclaim forgiveness of sins? What is the meaning of the empty tomb? After Jesus was buried, on the third day, the women came to us saying that they found an empty tomb. I rubbed my chin, considering what it meant.

I have to stitch things together in a way that makes sense in the world I'm living. For example, why would someone who can command the waters and wind walk straight into suffering, when they had the power to avert it? Why knowingly take up a cross? Why demand that I take it up, too? Is there supposed to be an intersection between the world's suffering and my life? Even today, I still ponder and puzzle and beg the questions, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" In a lifetime of doing so, I realize it is my form of faith, my form of discipleship—to ask questions and resist easy answers. The amazing thing is, I have actually come to some conclusions. I have found that there's only so much suffering the human heart can hold. I have found that Jesus must have known this. And when my heart and head brim over with burdens, I come back to the shores of the Sea of Galilee and replay the events of that night of the storm and the dead calm that came. I consider that it might be possible both to question and to rest in the calm.