

*Calm in the Storm*  
Pentecost IV  
2 Corinthians 6:1-10 and Mark 4:35-41  
June 20, 2021  
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On the morning of December 26, 2004, Sonali Deraniyagala was vacationing with her family at a beach resort on the south-eastern coast of Sri Lanka.<sup>1</sup> They were packing up to leave when the enormous waves of the tsunami made their way up the shoreline, hurling over the sandy beach toward the glass doors of their hotel room. At first, she recounts, it looked simply like the ocean had moved a little closer than normal, offering a zoomed-in look of a wave with its big, white curl. Then came the frightening realization: the waves are not receding. They are coming closer, furious and menacing in their swirling. Deraniyagala and her family were swept into the tsunami's waters. She survived. Her parents, husband and children did not. The days, months, and years after their deaths contained the same crushing panic of that December morning, an overwhelming disorientation caused by having precious pieces of one's life washed away. How does one live when the swirling waters strip away the anchors of one's being?

I start today's sermon about Jesus's calming of a storm with this tsunami scene because I believe the rising waves, the utter panic, and the sense of the imminent destruction move us closer to the experience of the disciples in the boat than imagining a slightly choppy trip across the Inner Harbor. We are perishing, the disciples cry. Their terror is both immediate and metaphoric, touching the chaos contained in an unruly sea and the vulnerability of being human, exposed to nature's raw power and life's inexplicable twists. Jesus rouses from his sleep to answer their cry, but his power to calm the winds frightens them even more. Here is a perplexing story with an inconclusive ending. What does faith look like across the waters? How might we turn anew to the Lord who speaks to wind and waves?

Jesus's early ministry is centered around the Sea of Galilee. It is here, when walking along the shore, that Jesus called his first four disciples. James, John, Peter and Andrew are fishermen, intimately familiar with the sea. Jesus preaches in the towns that dot the coastline. He travels from one town to another healing those in need. Sometimes, when the crowd swells too large, or gets so eager that it presses too close, Jesus gets in a boat and goes out into the water, to teach from there. Throughout the gospel Jesus and his disciples make numerous trips across the sea.

The Sea of Galilee is formed by waters flowing from the Jordan River. Shaped like a kidney bean, it is situated in a valley with the Galilean hillside rising up around it. Winds can get trapped by the hills. Temperatures vary between the higher, cooler air of the hills and the moist, warm air by the waters. The sea is also, relatively speaking, a shallow one. Taken together, the factors make the sea susceptible to sudden, intense storms. The distance across the Sea of Galilee from east to west is 8 miles. Although the time to travel across by boat would

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<sup>1</sup> Deraniyagala, Sonali, *Wave* (New York: Vintage, 2013).

vary due to the strength and direction of the wind, it certainly would be hours. A boat caught in the middle of the sea – with one shore out of sight behind them and the other not yet appearing – could be in danger if a storm descends. This certainly was the situation of the disciples, carrying with Jesus along with them. The waves beat at the boat, scripture says. The boat already is being swamped. Water is pouring in.

Exhausted when he climbed aboard, Jesus sleeps through the storm. His calmness contrasts the disciples' terror. I imagine they did not wait long before waking him, asking "Can't you sense the danger? Are you to be of no help? We need another set of hands to help bail out the water, steady the sail." Jesus performs neither of these emergency measures. He commands the sea to calm. He orders the wind to cease.

The first clue we are given that this is more than a story about a storm comes with Jesus's rebuke of the wind. He orders it to tame using the same language used to cast out demons. He speaks to the chaotic forces that destroy life and reminds them of his power over the sea, wind, and waves. The second clue comes with the disciples' reaction. The water is now calm. The air is still. The storm has passed. But the disciples are not relieved. They are more frightened. "They were afraid with great fear." They have glimpsed his power, which is stronger than the storm. They have seen his identity, which means they are in a boat with the Son of God.

"The sea, the storm, and the fragile craft that carry our Lord and the followers across the Sea of Galilee offer evocative, metaphorical images of our life of faith," writes Michael Lindvall.<sup>2</sup> Here we see the perils of some passages. Some parts of our journey are dangerous. Here we face the profound vulnerability of the vessel that bears us on our way. Whether "vessel" represents our bodies, our livelihoods, or our relationships, there is profound risk and break-able moments along the way. And here we admit our longing for "the One who calms both us and the storm."<sup>3</sup>

Jesus's act to still the sea storm is a story about a discipleship, which means it has clues for us about our faithful journeys across the sea. What lessons of faith might we take from this miracle?

First, faithful discipleship involves a commitment to growth, a willingness to move and be moved. The story begins with Jesus telling the disciples, "Let us go across to the other side." The other side of the sea is a foreign territory, a place somewhat strange to his followers, and full of opportunities for spreading God's grace. The faithful disciple is always on the lookout for ways to move, opportunities to venture into strange lands, to extend love to new places, and to discover new depths of relationship between God and self. God will continually surprise us, showing up in those unexpected new spaces and asking us to deepen our learning.

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<sup>2</sup> Lindvall, Michael L. "Pastoral Perspective on Mark 4:35-41" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year B Vol 3* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 168.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Second, in the midst of life's storms, our best option is to cling to Jesus's calm. None of us will escape a stormy sea. Some storms are predictable, visible from the horizon. Others are sudden, coming out of nowhere. The worst ones conjure up comparisons to primordial chaos, the wild destruction wrought by things beyond our control. The temptation is to cry like the disciples, "Don't you care?" or "God, why are you ignoring my plight?" Resist that corrosive doubt. Refuse to view the storm's presence as evidence of God's indifference. Instead, cling to God's care. Ask Jesus to give you a space to rest within his peace. Remember that Jesus never leaves the boat.

Lastly, the Christian disciple practices faith over fear. Faith over fear. Jesus's followers make a habit of choosing faith when fear threatens to overtake. Science will tell you there is real danger in stormy seas. Being faithful does not mean pretending that fear isn't ever warranted. Instead the follower of Jesus faces one's fear, while remembering Jesus's posture when his own life turned deadly. "Into your hands, God, I commend my life," he prayed. Earlier, he said, "I am the truth, and the truth sets you free." By continually asking Jesus for access to his stillness or a window into his command of creation, you will find your faith growing greater than your fear.

St. Augustine once wrote about Christ being asleep inside each of person. His image was meant to convey how easily human beings can forget Christ's presence. Centuries later, another Christian writer, Frederick Buechner, took Augustine's image of Christ sleeping within us and suggested what we needed to do was awaken Christ, shaking him awake in our own need, just as the disciples did on the perilous boat. "Come Jesus," he says, "come awake within us and give us courage, give us hope, show us our way, especially when the winds go mad and the waves run wild."<sup>4</sup> May Christ, who is peace, strength, hope, order, and love, be found awake beside you, to guide your way. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Buechner, Frederick, "A 250<sup>th</sup> Birthday Prayer" in *Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 297.