

When you talk to boaters, sooner or later, they will talk about "the big one," either the time they hit the rocks (or as the Brits say *hit the bricks*), or the time when they got caught out in big water. It could be a knockdown, heeling to the point where the mast hits the water. It could be a line squall or hopefully only the edge of a major storm. Hal and Margaret Roth sailed a 35 foot sailboat around the entire circumference of the Pacific Ocean basin. They planned meticulously -- determining the best time to be out on long ocean passages. It all worked fine. Until they got back to North America and were heading down the coast of Oregon in October--their worst experience in their years-long journey occurring in a familiar place.

Fishermen, more than most know the dangers of water. In Southeast Alaska, they call it "green water": "green water over the bow" or with greater menace, "green water over the wheelhouse." You keep the bow of the boat into the waves to avoid broaching; you watch the following seas after you crest a big one.

I wonder what the fishermen of old, say in Jesus' time, called the big water ...

The Sea of Galilee is a harp-shaped body of fresh water in the region of Galilee. The Jordan River carries the snows of Mount Hermon into lake or sea, entering from the north and leaving on the southwestern boundary of the lake --having flowed through its thirteen mile length. At its widest part, the lake is eight miles wide. Its circumference is thirty two miles; it has a depth of only 150 feet maximum. It lies 700 feet below sea level and is surrounded by hills 1200 to 1500 feet high. Due to the height of these hills combined with the below-sea level elevation of the lake itself, trouble can brew quickly. Abrupt temperature shifts occur, causing sudden and violent storms on a relatively shallow body of water. And so it is not surprising that the Gospels record storms on the lake, sudden and violent times of green water over the bow, the bow of open fishing boats with lateen sails and a helmsman's seat up high near the stern.

Our passage this morning is one of three passages in Mark's Gospel dealing with storms on the Sea of Galilee, also known as The Lake of Gennesaret. This is the first one in Mark chapter four, verses 35-41. In the next Jesus comes walking on the water. This follows the feeding of the five thousand in chapter six. The final account of a journey on the waters of the Sea occurs in chapter eight. It does not include a storm, but is a sailing journey to the town of Bethsaida on the Sea's northern coast, where a blind man is healed. In this one, the disciples have forgotten the bread and they seem concerned about

it even though they have just witnessed the feeding of the four thousand at the beginning of the chapter.

In all of these accounts, the disciples are more in the focus of attention. In the last account Jesus focuses on their hardness of heart-- that is their lack of understanding and trust. Especially in Mark's Gospel, they seem oblivious. He says "*Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes and fail to see? Do you have ears and fail to hear? Do you not remember? When I broke the loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?*" They said to him, "Twelve." "*And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?*" And they said to him, "Seven." Then he said to them, "*Do you not yet understand?*" In chapter six when he walks on the water (without the response of Peter getting out of the boat as in Matthew), they also do not understand and the text speaks of hardness of heart. But in the first journey, the one before us this morning, their response seems more like terror. Our text this morning uses the word "great awe" to explain their reaction, but other translations are more faithful to the Greek when the term 'terror' is used.

Terror. Terror on the part of fishermen who are used to storms? Used to sudden and violent storms on the shallow Sea of Galilee? *What kind of a storm is this? What monstrous waves have been stirred up?* What sudden violent winds are these that suddenly have these boats (remember there is more than one boat in this account, suggesting a lot of disciples)--that have these boats and these followers in such peril on the sea?

Dr. Matt Skinner, Professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary in St Paul, suggests in his commentary that this passage is literally awash with symbolic possibilities. The pun is his. Awash as the disciples try to manage their fears and keep their frail boats from turning turtle. Awash as they look upon the big waves foaming at the crest as they row as best they can with no doubt the sail completely furled. What fears lurk deep in the soul? What hope for survival disappears? They must have known: This storm was too much. This storm was impossible. And so they move towards the stern of the boat to awaken Jesus-- Jesus incredibly still asleep.

The Ugaritic texts that have survived from ancient times speak of the sea as being the enemy. Sea is the enemy of "Baal Haddu, the storm God. The storm God uses his weapons of wind, lightning, and thunder to beat back Sea." The Harper's Bible Dictionary then says "Vestiges of the battle between Sea and Baal can be seen in the Bible." References to Isaiah, Job and the Psalms are then cited before

this final statement: "The personification of Sea, however, is much weaker in the Bible than in the Ugaritic texts" (989).

But there are some other symbolic possibilities that are closer to home as the waves build and as the wind howls and as the men and no doubt women in these frail fishing boats out on the open water strain to keep from drowning.

They try to awaken Jesus. Imagine him sleeping stretched out on the helmsman's seat, his head on the only pillow in the boat as they shake him awake. They say to him (notice the respect in the rebuke) *Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?*

What waters are these...what waves? These are the waters of chaos, these are the waters of oblivion. And the disciples already know the outcome. They are perishing. Experienced with wind and waves, they already understand this to be their final storm on the Sea of Galilee. And these waters contain the great symbolic possibility of chaos itself. Chaos sending them to the bottom. Only G-d can hold back the waters of chaos.

Consider the very first words of Holy Scripture in Genesis: *In the beginning when G-d created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from G-d swept over the face of the waters.* A few verses later it is the singular void of water that G-d addresses and orders and separates: *And G-d said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." So G-d made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so.*

G-d is the master of chaos -- even primordial chaos. And now Jesus stands. He stands and faces wind and waves and addresses them. This passage does not strain to directly suggest that Jesus is G-d, but one cannot escape the inference that in Jesus the power of G-d resides. He speaks with authority-- authority and majesty and masterful presence -- things we cannot directly see, being mostly blind like those others in the boats. But he speaks nevertheless from this depth--this holy and regal depth-- even in the midst of terror and despair. Speaks. And the primordial wind and waves cease. He is the One who was there before all things were made, as we confess so often, and the waves and the wind cease. Jesus is the young David (he is in the line of David) before the nine foot tall storm God Goliath and his words are his five smooth stones.

Psalm 74 verses 23-30:

Some went down to the sea  
in ships  
Doing business on the mighty  
waters;  
they saw the deeds of the LORD  
his wondrous works in the deep.  
For he commanded and raised  
the stormy wind  
which lifted up the waves of  
the sea.  
They mounted up to heaven  
they went down to the  
depths;  
their courage melted away in  
their calamity  
...  
Then they cried to the LORD in  
their trouble,  
and he brought them out from  
their distress;  
he made the storm be still,  
and the waves of the sea were  
hushed.  
Then they were glad because they  
had quiet,  
and he brought them to their  
desired haven.

The psalm is entitled *Thanksgiving for the deliverance from many troubles*. And this seems to be where Jesus is to be found. But the solutions are often hidden. And like Job we have business with G-d from the ash heap of confusion or direct and implacable suffering or profound loss and ruination and yet tragedy. Business with G-d. Is it still possible that this Spirit brooding over the waters of creation and over our own internal storms and over profound suffering and loss like those of mothers and their children separated at the border and those in the refugee camps displaced in countries of the Middle East and in Africa --possible that this Spirit can yet bring us to that place where, with Job, we can see more fully, more fully embracing the great Mystery?

Job in chapter 19:

For I know that my Redeemer  
lives

and that at the last he will  
stand upon the earth  
and after my skin has been thus  
destroyed;  
then in my flesh I shall  
see G-d,  
whom I shall see on my side  
and my eyes shall behold, and  
not another.  
My heart faints within me!

Dr. Matt Skinner writes, *Life stands toe to toe with death in many places in Mark.* And as we end this sermon this morning I leave you with just one more of Skinner's thoughts:

*In liminal [at the threshold] places, Jesus conducts ministry, opens minds to new possibilities, and sets people free to enter into a new future in freedom and wholeness. He meddles with borders, not because he has a penchant for chaos, but because the reign of G-d [mine] extends divine holiness and a commitment to human well-being to places that we might have thought were beyond the limits. To him, no place is desolate. No one is abandoned.*

There are many places where borders need to be messed with. Many places where chaos appears in new and protean forms. And this is where Jesus is to be found. And even in our blindness and hardness of heart and lack of understanding we as well--for we must follow him.

They wake him sleeping in the stern of the boat and he rises. And he stands before the waters of chaos even as he will be lifted up before the waters of suffering and death at Golgotha.

He rises and speaks; and the wind and the waves die down.

In the name of G-d--Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.