

Sermon for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
Calvary Lutheran Church
August 9, 2020
Job 38:4–18; Ps. 18:1–6; Rom. 10:5–17; Matthew 14:22–33

Grace and peace to you, from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I have never been caught in a wind storm of any kind, but one of my older brother's who lives on the coast of South Florida is a bit more familiar with them. He keeps a keen eye on weather reports when storms are threatening the eastern coast. Even with remarkable technological advancements, these storms can often still be unpredictably destructive, fear-inducing and out of the control of even the most skilled meteorologists. In our readings for today, we have two storm stories, one from Job 38 and the other from Matthew 14. Long before technology could predict these storms were on the horizon, we are brought into the midst of intense whirling winds, threatening the lives of God's children. We hear of Job and the disciples caught in these dark storms where their faith contends with doubt and fear. With the psalmist, Job and Christ's disciples could in all truth say: "The cords of death entangled me; the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me." And in both stories, we hear of God coming to them, encountering them with his steady voice and revealing himself as Creator of heaven and earth, and as their merciful Savior.

Our Old Testament lesson brings us into the story of Job, though near the very end of it. Job's was a life marked by significant tragedy. We are told he was an upright man who feared God and turned away from evil, yet he was stripped of his home, children, possessions, health and even his sanity. He was demonized by the friends who were supposed to be closest to him, and scorned by his own wife. And to add to the continuous whirlwind thrusting him further downward toward despair, Job was falsely told by his friends that the horrible circumstances which had befallen him were his own fault. "The punishment must fit the crime," must have been a proverbial favorite of Job's would-be friends, for they determined that Job's suffering must have been brought about by grave sin to warrant such punishment from Almighty God. And so goes the tumultuous storm of Job's life.

Just after a mighty wind had struck and destroyed Job's house and his sons and daughters who were in it, he uttered these chilling yet beautiful words: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised." This is unflinching faith that

seems hardly possible for a man to say under those circumstances unless he had been granted divine strength from outside of himself.

A few chapters later, though, Job is cursing the day he was born. Tormented by grief and judgment, Job wants the darkness to overtake him. Yet somehow, his faith persists even if it does begin to flinch. He does not take his wife's advice to curse God and die. He stays put, despite his despair, trying to draw near to a God he cannot see. He draws near with complaints and questions, even with presumption as to his own innocence. Job is desperate for God to break the silence and give answers to his deepest questions. Confused, betrayed, tormented and utterly despondent, Job had every reason to give in and let the storm swallow him up.

In Matthew 14, Peter and the other disciples are also in the midst of a dark, troubling storm, a storm that Jesus, in fact, sent them into. After miraculously feeding the five-thousand plus crowd with a few loaves and a couple of fish, the disciples naturally did not want to leave Jesus' side. But he made them get into their boat and head across the Sea of Galilee on their own while he dismissed the crowds and went up the mountain to pray. *Jesus purposefully went away from them.* This is what Matthew, Mark and John all emphasize in telling the story—Jesus sent the disciples away from himself. Meanwhile with tired arms and trembling hearts, the disciples were alone in the dark. For hours that must have felt like days, all they could see and hear were the mighty waves crashing around them.

In both stories, from the midst of the storm, God speaks. If faith comes by hearing, as our reading from Romans says, it would be awfully cruel of God to tell us that we must have faith if he did not speak in such a way that we could hear, if he did not come to us with his word to bring us the faith upon which our life depends. But this is just what these stories reveal. God comes. He speaks. God does not remain far off in a remote place above the storms we face.

In Job's case, the word of God that comes to Job doesn't sound all that comforting or calming. Out of the whirlwind God says, Where were you, Job, when I formed the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you know. Were you the master architect who measured out the boundaries of the earth or sunk its bases into place? Did you determine how far the waters would stretch or prescribe borders to the land? Have you ever commanded the sun to rise or caused the dawn to know its place? Have you journeyed to the springs of the sea or walked on the recesses of the deep? As we'll see in a few moments, Peter got a sense of what it might be like to sink to the depths of the sea, and he realized it would not go well for him. God, the Creator of heaven and earth, hurls Job against the infinite with this series of questions, the obvious answer to

all them being no. Job is a finite man; he stands on the creature side of the Creator/creature divide. He has absolutely no control or power over the creation of the universe. Like weather forecasters today, he does not have the ability to fully understand, determine or manage the cosmos. Neither does Job have the ability to reason out or fully understand the deep questions which vex his heart day and night.

God's word comes to Job in this exact place as balm to his wounds. Job doesn't get all of his doubts or fears straightened out. His questions go largely unanswered. But he encounters the Maker of heaven and earth who knows the end from the beginning, and speaks to Job personally. It's as if God is saying to Job, I am much greater and more powerful than you have courage to believe, I have formed things beyond your imagining, and yet I have come to visit you Job. I have come to talk to you as a *true* Friend. I have come to be near to you in this tumultuous storm you neither asked for nor deserved. I have come to you, and despite what your friends say, you are not forgotten by me. I will not remove my steady gaze from you, and I will give you the steadfast faith you need to go on trusting me.

The word of the Lord that came to the disciples fearing for their lives also came in an unmistakable and unforeseen way. It was not the quick word they had probably hoped for, a word that simply told the storm to hush and be still. Similar to Job, the disciples grew more terrified before they were ever calmed. As if the waves weren't enough, they now saw a creature walking on top of the waves who they assumed was a ghost. No human being can walk on water even when its still, let alone storm-tossed waves. It was a bad nightmare that only grew worse.

"Immediately," Matthew tells us, *immediately* Jesus spoke. He says, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." You'd think that would have been enough. You'd think that just the sound of Jesus' voice would have been comforting to them after hours of hearing nothing but waves crashing against their boat, their oars slapping the unruly waters. But, then again, it must be hard to hear from someone walking on water, Jesus or not. Peter doesn't yet trust Christ's word and his presence on the water still didn't register to his senses. How often is our faith weakened by fear in this way, just needing a little more assurance than what's been provided to us? This doubting of the Word of God and wanting to add something to it is our age-old struggle.

And of all the things Peter could have asked for to ensure that it really was Jesus speaking, I cannot for the life of me figure out why Peter asked what he did. "If it's you Lord, tell me to come to you on the water." I think if I was doubting in that moment, I might've come up with something like, 'Lord how many loaves and fish did it take to feed all of those people today,' or 'Jesus please command this wind to

stop!' Peter has another idea. "If it really is you Lord, tell me to come out there with you." He's wavering between faith and fear, so he asks a question with a rather absurd condition.

Whether it's a foolish question or not, Jesus actually stoops to Peter and does exactly what he asks. "Come," Jesus simply replies. That word "come" transforms Peter, and so he takes a step. Defying the humanly possible, Peter begins to move toward Jesus on the water. Then fear takes hold of him again, and he begins to sink. But the fear is still somehow co-mingled with faith because Peter manages to cry out, "Lord, save me!" Then Matthew uses that word immediately again. Immediately, we are told, Jesus reaches out his hand to catch Peter. "Oh you of little faith, why did you doubt?" Jesus asks. The two of them together presumably walk on the waves until they get back into the boat. I'm not sure why Jesus didn't just end the storm right away, when they were still out there on the water. He waits a little while longer, perhaps strengthening Peter's trust in him as he puts one foot in front of the other, and Jesus ushers him back into the boat. The wind finally stops and the disciples confess in awe-struck worship "Truly you are the Son of God." The fear subsides with worship, with recognition of who Jesus is and who he is with them and for them.

For Job, the story ends in worship and praise too. In the final chapter of the book, Job repents and says "I know that you [God] can do all things, no plan of yours can be thwarted" (Job 42:2). However sarcastic or harsh God's words may have sounded to Job, they were kind. God's kindness is what leads to our repentance (Rom. 2:4), and Job did repent of his presumption, of his desire to understand what only belongs to the mind of God. He is praised by the apostle James for his steadfastness, though much of his life didn't look steadfast. He was an emotionally disturbed and hurting man who kept fighting to trust even though the reinforcements on every side told him to walk away. Peter too was exalted as the rock upon whom the church would be built. And this was despite a lot of stumbling, including a series of outright denials that he even knew Jesus.

The two stories reveal to us that we followers of Jesus are often vacillating between faith and a distinct lack of it. Job and the disciples are not strangers to the difficulties of trusting a Savior who cannot be seen with natural eye sight, a Savior who at times seems terrifyingly far away from the confusing circumstances of our lives. But the beautiful reality magnified in both storm stories is that God knows and sees us, and he does not tire of drawing close to us even when our faith grows dim. Out of the whirlwind of his love and mercy, he comes and speaks. He reaches out his hand and lifts us again and again so that we do not sink.

I don't quite know what might be testing your faith today or what storms may be brewing around you. There is probably something that is provoking each one of us to doubt the Lord's goodness or nearness. Or perhaps like Job, we are tempted to doubt that the Lord who is in control over the measurements of creation is in control over—and even tenderly cares about—the particular circumstances of our lives. The good news is this: no matter what might be stirring up our fears and doubts today, the same God who spoke to Job and to the disciples is present with us. He who permits the storms—and even sometimes leads us straight into them—he is speaking to us with his steadying voice, telling us that he is in the midst of them *with us*.

We don't have the great benefit of Jesus' hand physically reaching down to grab us, but we do have his word that gives us faith to cling to him as he spiritually grabs hold of us. Do not be afraid, his word is not powerless, it will accomplish what he intends. He speaks to you today, even through an audio recording. He will continue to reach out to you with his outstretched hands, opening your ears so you can hear him speak. And while our grip on him might be frail and flimsy, do not be afraid, his grip on us is strong and sure. To him alone be all glory forever and ever. Amen.