

Living in Stormy Times

A Sermon by Rich Holmes

Scripture: Mark 4: 35-41 and Second Samuel 11: 26-12:13a

We probably all think we know what this story from our gospel lesson today is about. As this story begins, we are told that Jesus wants to make the eight-mile journey across the Sea of Galilee with his disciples. Now, we are not told what the weather is like as they launch their boat, but we can imagine that they would not have set out in what was probably a small wooden fishing boat if the thunder was rolling and there were any ominous black clouds overhead. First century fishing vessels, after all, were only about 27 feet long and seven and a half feet wide, and though I know nothing about sailing, I can tell you that such a vessel is small enough to be threatened by anything more than a gentle rain and a light breeze. But as the disciples make their journey out onto the sea, it may be that there isn't even this much. There isn't even a gentle rain and a light breeze, and so why not set sail?

But on this day, something happens which the Sea of Galilee is notorious for. As I imagine the disciples are dead in the middle of the open water, miles from either shore, in almost an instant, the blue sky turns dark and a violent thunderstorm pops up. Lightning flashes, thunder rolls, giant waves start tossing the little boat one way and then another, rain comes down in buckets—and as they feel their little boat being tossed about and watch it fill up with water, the disciples are frantic. They are shouting at one another, screaming, maybe even crying. But is Jesus doing this? There is no screaming, or shouting or crying going on with Jesus, no, through all this drama and commotion, Jesus is asleep, his head resting gently on a cushion. The disciples are shocked to find him this way, and in the translation of the story that we use they say “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” But doesn't that sound so calm? I picture

them grabbing Jesus and shaking him saying “Wake up, what’s the matter with you? We’re all about to die!”

But Jesus is calm. He has nothing of this sense of panic. He says “Peace, Be Still!” and to everyone’s amazement, with the same suddenness with which it came, at this word, the storm simply leaves. The winds stop, the water becomes smooth as glass, the dark clouds disappear.

We may think we know what this story is all about. So, tell me, what is it about? If you were to teach this story to children, or to a Sunday school class, you would probably say that this is a story about our Lord’s divine power to calm a storm, just like the Lord has the power to walk on water and raise the dead and make the lame walk. If you said that you would be right, of course, and you would be in good company, because that seems to be what the disciples who were there were amazed with as they watched this drama unfold. As they watched a storm disappear around them at Jesus word, they said “Who is this that even the winds and the sea obey him?”

But isn’t there more than one storm that is raging in this story? As the disciples find themselves in the middle of the open water in the Sea of Galilee, there is naturally a storm above them and all around them with all the usual events that come with storms: rain, clouds, thunder, lightning. But isn’t there is also a storm within them with all the usual events that come with inner storms as well: shouts, screams, tears, stomachs churning? And it is *this* kind of storm that is also calmed with Jesus’ command “Peace, Be Still!”

I have titled my sermon today *Living In Stormy Times*. But when I chose this title for my sermon I was not thinking about the kind of stormy times that come with certain seasons of the year, nor was I thinking of anything having to do with global climate change, nor was I thinking

about anything else that has to do with the kinds of storms that go on above us or around us in the natural world. What I was thinking about, rather, is the kind of storms that go on inside us. The shouting, screaming, stomach churning storms.

It seems to me that we are living in stormy times because we are living in times that many have described as anxious times. Some have even said that we are living in an anxiety epidemic. An article in the popular magazine *Psychology Today* states that in our time, the average high school kid has the same level of anxiety as the average psychiatric patient in the early 1950s. Now, I have no doubt that anxiety has always been with us, and maybe what is happening now is simply that more and more people are coming forward to admit their anxious feelings when in a different time there was a stigma and a social shame attached to such admissions. Well, I am not an expert on such things, but I suspect that there is more to it than that. I suspect that it isn't just that more people are coming forward to admit what they were once afraid to admit, as good as that is, I suspect that in the modern world there is simply more anxiety out there than there ever was before. It is more widespread, and it is more severe. But why? Well I don't know why. But it could be because for everything good that modern life has promised us, it has brought us some kind of new fear and new worry that we didn't sign up for, some new fear and worry that is enough to make us wonder if we're really any better off in the modern world.

First, the modern ability to split the atom means that physicists have found a way to unleash enough power to meet all the world's energy needs, and not only the needs that we currently have right now, but even all the needs that we could ever conceivably have. The ability to split the atom means we could meet any such needs a hundred times over, but

splitting the atom has also meant that at the press of a button we could destroy all forms of life a hundred times over.

Second, the modern global economy has delivered us the promise that all of us can shop at superstores and buy inexpensive products from all over the globe. It also means that businesses can hire and train people from all over the world at very little cost. And because new technology so often means that machines can do the jobs of five people, when you go shopping those costs aren't passed on to you, the consumer. But it also means that your job that is bringing you financial security can also be outsourced to India or China at the blink of an eye, or be replaced by a robot in the blink of an eye. And even if your job seems perfectly secure today, you have no idea if it will be tomorrow.

And finally, the modern twenty-four-hour news cycle means that events that happen all over the world are no longer remote from our experience. They are no longer these far-off events that you either have to read about in the local paper, hear about on the radio or wait until the evening to watch Walter Cronkite talk about them on a fuzzy black and white television set. Now they are always on the internet always on cable in living color and high definition. Sometimes, that's not such a bad thing. Sometimes we need to see vivid images of what is happening in the world so that we can be moved to take action and make the world a better place. In our Old Testament lesson today, we have the story of a time when it was indeed necessary to see something vividly and up close. Our Old Testament lesson today is all about King David, and how he had a love affair with the beautiful Bathsheba. There was just one problem. Bathsheba was already married to Uriah the Hittite. So King David did what far too many people with absolute power would do in that case, he had Uriah killed. No more

Uriah, Bathsheba is now all mine. So then, the prophet Nathan came to David and Nathan told him a story. And in that story he told David about a rich man and a poor man. The rich man had had lots and lots of sheep and cattle, but the poor man only had one little ewe lamb that he bought, and he raised it as his own. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him. And then one day, a traveler came to visit the rich man, but the rich man refused to take one of his own many cattle or sheep to prepare a meal for the traveler. Instead he took the lamb that belonged to the poor man, had it slaughtered, and prepared a meal for his guest.

Well, David became enraged as anyone with half a heart would by such a story, and he said the rich man must die. And the prophet Nathan said you are the man. In this vivid story that he knew David could understand, Nathan made David look at the injustice he had done to Uriah the Hittite in living color, in high definition. The injustice he had done that was no different from what the rich man in the story had done to the poor man. Sometimes we need to see things in living color, in sharp images. Sometimes those things need to be on our laptops and in our living rooms, but I think it becomes too much for our brains and our hearts when these constant vivid images also mean that at *every moment of everyday*, we can feel as though terrible events that are happening half a world away are actually happening to us here and now.

With all the new promises of modern life come new anxieties, and the bad thing about anxiety is that anxiety can destroy your life, because it can make bad things happen to you over and over again even when they have never actually happened at all. When you are anxious you can get fired over and over again, even though you've never actually lost your job. When you

are anxious you can get sick and die over and over again even when you are actually quite healthy. When you are anxious you can get divorced over and over again, even when your marriage is happy.

A few years ago, I remember I sat down to watch a talk show, when the guest was a young woman who came on complaining about how her mother treated her. And at first I thought “Oh, what’s new? I’ve heard all this before! This young woman’s mother must be interfering in her life telling her that she doesn’t like her husband or she doesn’t like her boyfriend or she doesn’t like the way she’s raising her grandkids.”

But this guest talked about something different. She didn’t have any of the usual complaints. You see, five years earlier the young woman had been in a terrible car accident which left her in the hospital for a week, an awful event for this young woman’s mother, as it would be for any parent. But because the mother nearly lost her daughter once, she was terrified that this was going to happen again and she was going to lose her daughter once and for all. And so what she would do is she would call her daughter up on the phone about fifty times a day just to make sure that something terrible hadn’t happened to again. If her daughter didn’t answer the phone, the mother would panic and leave these frantic messages. Well, her daughter would plead with her to stop doing this, to stop this suffocating behavior, she would say “I can’t go on having a relationship with you and living my life too if you keep acting this way, and if you don’t stop you’re going to force me to choose.” But the mother couldn’t stop. She kept replaying this scenario over and over again in her mind that the terrible thing which happened to her daughter once would happen all over again and in a much worse way. Anxiety will destroy your life.

But to all these storms of anxiety that can destroy your life, our Lord says “Peace! Be Still!” And our Lord has the power to command the winds and the sea of these inner storms because the Lord is the Lord of all hope. Anyone who has mastered the English language knows that hope is the opposite of fear, and worry and anxiety, and the reason for that is because no matter how bad your life gets, hope is what feels joy about a new possibility, hope feels joy about what might be and what could be. Hope says that no matter what is happening to me, this is not all there is to life, I can imagine a different reality and I can’t stop singing and dancing about that different reality. But anxiety does just the opposite. Anxiety says that no matter what kind of reality I’m living in and no matter how much it calls for singing and dancing, I can’t sing and dance, I can’t sing and dance because I can only picture things being much, much worse.

You know, given all of this anxiety in modern life, I do not want to suggest that there is nothing we can do about our social problems except trust God. When there are obvious solutions to our social problems I have to tell you in all candor that I get frustrated with the kind of preaching that just ignores such solutions and says trust Jesus—as if somehow trying to take your problems in your own hands or work together with your neighbor shows a lack of faith. As if the God who equipped us with imagination and creativity and intelligence didn’t also give us the power to solve a lot of our problems. There is a friend of mine who’s a pastor down in Florida, and he likes to say “Without God, I can’t, but without me, God won’t.” I like that. Maybe we should all memorize that bit of wisdom. Maybe we should put that on our t-shirts, stick it to our bumpers, cross-stitch it and hang it over our mantles. Or maybe instead of saying

“Without God, I can’t, but without me, God won’t” we should simply drop the negations and say “With God I can, and with me, God will.”

But as we say “with me, God will” we would also do well to remember that there are people in this world, there are more people than we know, whose only possible “With me” is the ability to cry out to God. There are more people than we know for whom the storm clouds are so dark, and for whom the winds blow and the rain beats down so hard, that their only possible “With me” is to cry out “Teacher do you not care that we are perishing—Teacher, do you not care that *I* am perishing.” If that is you, then from this time forward, may you know that you are not alone. The Lord does care. The Lord knows the storms that are churning inside you and the Lord says “Peace, Be Still! Peace, Be Still!”

Have you been waiting a long time to hear those words? Have you been waiting so long that you have simply given up and come to accept that the storms you live with are just the way it is? You don’t have to accept. Jesus is the Lord of all hope, and he commands the wind and the sea.