

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
12th Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 25, 2006

Hurricane Season
Mark 4:35-41; Psalm 103:23-32

We are now into vacation season,
and those of us trekking off to the coast this summer
are keeping a nervous eye on the weather map
for storms that might threaten our plans.

It's good to have the Raines family back in church with us today
after their vacation,
and to see that they survived the first storm of the 2006 Hurricane Season:
Tropical Storm Alberto.

They report that by the time Alberto reached them at the OBX
there wasn't much left of him,
but they have some good pictures of the choppy sea.

Apparently, the wind and waves weren't so dangerous
as the crowd of vacationers trying to squeeze
into the few OBX movie theaters all on the same afternoon.

So far Alberto has been the only storm to get a name.
But the weather experts tell us to expect a more-active-than-usual
hurricane season this year,
which some would say is due to the effects of global warming.
A new report by the National Academy of Sciences, released Thursday,
concludes that the Earth is heating up at a rate that
"is unprecedented for at least the last 400 years
and potentially the last several millennia"
and that "human activities are responsible for much of
the recent warming."

Whether you believe this, or are skeptical about global warming,
you'll agree that a more active hurricane season
is a troublesome thing for people.

The local victims of Hurricane Ivan, nearly 2 years ago,
would remind us that it's not just the season itself,
but the aftermath of the season that takes its toll on our livelihood.

It has been 21 months
since the McLaughlins were flooded out of their home
and they are just now on the verge of settling into a house
on higher ground.

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In the gospel reading today,
the disciples and Jesus are caught up in a storm
that is every bit as fearsome and life-threatening as a hurricane.
In the Bible,
when the wind and waves of the sea rise up,
it always means *something more* than just a meteorological event.
In the biblical imagination,
the sea represented the very powers of chaos and evil
which threaten to break loose and destroy
the goodness and life of God's created order.
For the disciples,
to be caught in a storm on the sea
was to experience the whole world coming apart at the seams.

This is a story we can relate to, an experience we can understand.
We encounter all kinds of storms in our lives
that threaten to tear our world apart at the seams.
There are times when we may feel as if we are living in the midst
of a spiritual and emotional hurricane season.

Our storms rise up on all sorts of waters:
They may rise out of natural causes,
like an illness, or the birth of a child, or the death of a spouse;
or a natural disaster (like an actual hurricane).
There is no one really to be blamed for these storms.
Unless you're into blaming God for what's wrong.

Other storms may brew in the seas of moral failure;
that is, they are a result of someone's sin, someone's mistakes,
someone's acting out their brokenness in hurtful ways.
You could blame the sinners for these storms,
but then nobody asked to be broken,
to be born into this fallen human race.

Again, I suppose we could blame God for that.
But, sometimes we may find ourselves caught up in storms
because we have been faithful and are doing the right things,
because we are disciples of Jesus,
because we have heard the call of Christ and have followed.

That's what happens to the disciples in this story.
They are with Jesus in this boat
because they have heard and answered his calling,
to go across the sea and continue his ministry

among the Gentiles on the other side;
they're doing every thing right
when the storm hits.

This may be why the disciples are more than a little edgy with Jesus:
Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing.

They're not quite blaming Jesus for the storm,
just for not caring enough to help them escape their trouble.

So Jesus, now fully awake, gets up and does what only God can do.
He speaks to the sea and commands it: *Peace. Be still.*
It doesn't say he yelled at the sea, over the noise of the crashing waves.
It doesn't say he cried out, or shouted out.
Jesus simply spoke, and the sea obeyed him.
... the wind ceased and there was a dead calm.

In the stunned silence the disciples must have realized what this meant.
These Hebrew fisherman, if they knew any of the Psalms by heart,
surely remembered the Psalm of Thanksgiving
that praises God for saving those who...

*...went down to the sea on 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;
they reeled and staggered like drunkards,
and were at their wits' end.
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.*

This was a Psalm of Thanksgiving about what God did
to save those in peril on the sea.
And now Jesus had just done it before their eyes.
He simply said to the Hurricane: *Peace. Be Still.*
Then the wind ceased and there was a dead calm.

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In this moment of astonished stillness, Jesus turns to the disciples
and he speaks plainly to them
one of the essential tenets, the central dynamics, of his gospel:
Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?

Fear, anxiety, timidity are powerful drivers,
and they are, of course, natural human emotions.
According to one psychologist, even for the healthiest people,
it is only possible to live without anxiety about 80% of the time.
It is perhaps the case that the only time we can really be non-anxious
is when we are asleep or on some kind of drug.

But stress management experts say
that only two percent of our "worrying time"
is spent on things that might actually be helped by worrying.
I'm not sure how they get at figures like this, but they make intuitive sense.
They say that the other 98% of our worry is spent as follows:
40% on things that never happen
35% on things that can't be changed
15% on things that turn out better than expected
8% on useless, petty worries.

When it comes to fear, anxiety, timidity,
the emotions themselves are not really the problem for our faith
so much as whether we choose to live by these emotions.
For the person of faith,
fear and anxiety and timidity can serve a good purpose
if they become *signals* for us
that it's time to actively turn our hearts to God in trust.

For Jesus, faith is the opposite of fear.
In every life, even the life of a good and faithful religious person,
storms will rise up;
we will encounter danger, and threat and pain.
The gospel that Jesus proclaims makes no promises
that these circumstances will never happen to us.
Instead, Jesus offers us a place of trust in which we can safely dwell
in the midst of these storms.

For Jesus, it is *fear itself* which must be cured,
not the occasions of fear.

Faith is NOT the assurance
that what we are afraid of will not happen to us,
but that because we live under the love and care of God
there is nothing, ultimately, to be afraid of.

Why are we afraid?

It is because either
we have stopped trusting in God's *power*
to hold back the powers of chaos and evil,
or we have stopped trusting in God's *love*,
that God cares about us when we are perishing.
We live by fear *when our faith is weak*.

There are actually two different words used for fear in this passage.
When Jesus asks, *Why are you afraid*,
he uses a word that refers to fear that comes from inner defects:
a lack of courage, a loss of heart, a timidity of spirit.

But then, after Jesus stills the storm,
the disciples are said to be filled with great *awe*,
that is, filled with great *fear*.

But here, it's a different word:
it's a fear that comes from something external;
by recognizing a danger, or a threat,
or more positively,
by recognizing that we are in the presence of great power;
in the sense of reverence.

Jesus' miracle on the sea,
transforms the disciples from being fearful in this inner sense,
to being in awe, fearful, in this more positive sense.
Jesus shows us that the power and love of God
are more to be revered than any circumstance
that may confront or threaten us.

So the question of faith becomes:
What would I do if I were not afraid?
Or, better, what would I do if I trusted God
more than I feared this storm?

What if the disciples had lived by faith in the storm,
what would they have done?
I think they would still wake Jesus up and ask for help.
After all, the external factors were real and threatened their mission,

the good they were seeking to do as well as their very lives.
But perhaps they would have done so
without the anxious accusation that Jesus didn't care.
It was their inner state of mistrust that Jesus challenged.
Their lack of faith was in that they respected the power of the storm
more than the power and love of their Savior.

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The good and bad thing about hurricanes
is that only the most solid things hold fast ;
the sand and everything else unsubstantial
is washed away.
The house built on faith is the house built upon the rock.
Even if the house goes, the rock remains.

The other good news about hurricanes
is that they do come and go
in seasons.
Surviving the storm means that a season of calm will come again.

Having Faith in the midst of the storm,
means trusting that God never stops caring,
and always has the power
to deliver us from the storm
so that we arrive, finally,
in the place God wants us...and needs us...to be.