

Sermon Proper 7 B

Today's gospel is a continuation of a series of Jesus' teachings on the reign of God. Last week, Jesus spoke in parables about God's providing a lavish harvest even without much human effort. And, he used the illustration of a mustard seed which bursts forth from minute size into exuberant growth.

Jesus used lots of images in teaching his disciples. This morning he provides them with a personal experience. Significantly, this experience is about the calming of the seas. For centuries, ancient peoples had experienced the power of their gods most clearly in keeping the waters at bay. They feared extinction, and so their gods needed to be able to hem in the sea, to prevent its waters from drowning them. We find these stories of unruly destructive waters in Gilgamesh, the epic story from Mesopotamia, and in ancient writings from India. Water not as life-giving but as death-dealing.

And the Jews, also, applied to Yahweh this power over the waters. Their creator God had set boundaries to the sea and would preserve them even in the face of great danger. This is the setting for the Book of Job. He is tested by the storms of his life, but remains steadfast in the midst of his troubles.

Our psalmist speaks of those caught in a mighty storm, buffeted by wild winds who rely on God, and who are rescued and brought to safe harbor by God's mercy.

Jesus' disciples also get caught in a wild storm. Now remember, these are experienced fishermen. They would never have gotten into their boats and cast off onto the lake if there had been thunderclouds gathering, or if they'd seen lightning, or if the wind had picked up to gale force. No, they had no warning about this storm. So, unawares, unprepared, they sit in a small boat on a large lake. And Jesus is asleep. All seems well until the wind picks up and the storm clouds gather on the horizon. And Jesus sleeps on. They are panic stricken. Terrified. And Jesus sleeps on. Who will rescue them? Who can make the storm go away? We are lost, they think. We'll never get out of this alive. Our fragile little boat will surely capsize in these winds. And Jesus sleeps on.

Who of us does not understand this feeling? We are caught by surprise in a great storm. We are sitting comfortably in a small boat when suddenly huge swells of water rise up on every side. One summer a number of years ago, I went on a whale watch off Plymouth harbor. Everything was going very smoothly, if you overlook the fact that we didn't see any whales! But the ride itself was

lovely. Four of us were together enjoying the afternoon breeze. And then suddenly we were enjoying the afternoon winds. And then we weren't enjoying anything at all. The wind had become an afternoon storm with 6 foot waves. The boat was tossed upwards, stranded in mid-air with nothing underneath it and then would fall with a great thud onto the surging waters. And then again, caught by a wave, hurled into the air, poised in mid-air with no support, and then would come crashing down into the waves. This stormy ride took about two hours, but felt immeasurably longer.

Who of us does not know about a storm arising from no place? We go to the doctor for a routine physical and the doctor discovers a suspicious growth. We think things are going fine in our family relationships and then suddenly there is talk of a divorce or separation. Our jobs seem to be OK and then the boss calls us in and starts talking about downsizing. It happened to me. I could hear my boss's words washing over me like waves on a sea, and all the time I was thinking what am I going to do? I was sitting frozen in my chair in front of his desk realizing that I had no idea where to turn. My secure safe world was being pulled out from under me. I was being fired.

We can have a similar experience when we realize that we are in over our heads. We're mired in something we can't get out of-

addiction, bad choices, a friendship gone sour, a life derailed or adrift. We need to face something in our life for which we feel completely unprepared, a birth or a death, a job or school situation, an illness or a family crisis, suddenly caught unawares with a storm coming up. And here we are in a tiny little boat.

We all have storms. We are never promised a life without storms. What we are promised is God's deliverance. And what is true for us personally is also true for the church. As a Christian community we have had moments of crisis and great trouble from the very beginning of our history.

This image of a boat on a great sea has been for 2,000 years an image of the Christian church. Here we are tossed about, in the bark of Peter, on a sea far larger and more unmanageable than we can deal with. What are we to do? The message in our scripture readings today is that God is our deliverer. Sometimes we don't accept God's deliverance until we have exhausted all our own possibilities. Only then are we willing to turn to God for saving help, to wake Jesus up in the boat. Notice, that nowhere in the scriptures are we told that God will save us FROM the storms of this life. No. God saves us IN the storms of this life. We are delivered by God's power when we are in greatest peril. But we are not usually snatched out of the peril. We need to entrust

ourselves while sitting in a fragile boat or we need to tread water and pray until a passing ship lifts us out of the stormy waters and brings us to safe harbor.

So what, then, does this experience teach us about God's reign? It is real life lived with God at the heart of it, present to save. And it is our experience of being delivered that assures us of God's mercy and sends us out to share with others the story of God's mercy. We go in mission to share our own experiences of storms lived through, of wild winds attacking our fragile little boats and of our being saved by God's grace. Here some of us are survivors. Many of us know very well about storms and winds and huge waves, about surviving against great odds. Many of us know first hand about the grace of God which came to us when we were most in need of it. And it is the assurance of that saving presence of God in the very midst of our lives that makes us apostles of the good news.

But we also need to hold before us the awesome power of God. God is, indeed, present to deliver us. But God is also ruler of the chaos and calmer of the seas. When the disciples awakened Jesus in the boat they set loose a power far more challenging than any storm. Mary Oliver has a poem, entitled "Maybe" which she concludes by saying:

Nobody knows what the soul is.

It comes and goes

like the wind over the water-

sometimes, for days.

you don't think of it.

Maybe, after the sermon,

after the multitude was fed,

one or two of them felt

the soul slip forth.

like a tremor of pure sunlight

before exhaustion,

that wants to swallow everything,

gripped their bones and left them

miserable and sleepy,

as they are now, forgetting

how the wind tore at the sails

before he rose and talked to it-

tender and luminous and demanding
as he always was-
a thousand times more frightening
than the killer storm.

The mighty power of God to deliver is a holy and fearful reality at the heart of our lives. Never anything to tame or control. We are in the presence of the holy God. And so we come to worship. Not only to be comforted and consoled, although that is our strength. Not only to ask for deliverance from the stormy waters that surround us, although that is our hope. But to worship the mighty and living God. And that is our privilege. That is our life in the reign of God.

And so we pray: To God whose power now working within us can do immeasurably more than we can even ask for or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, now and forever. Amen.