

"Command Me"

Rev. Peter Bynum

August 13, 2017

²²Immediately [Jesus] made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. ²⁷But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

²⁸Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." ²⁹He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" ³¹Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" ³²When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." (Matthew 14:22-33)

Whenever we encounter stormy water in the Bible, scripture is almost always using it to remind us of the scene in Genesis 1 -- the time "in the beginning," when "darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters" (Genesis 1:2). One of God's earliest acts was to gather those dark waters together and push them back to create a place of peace and safety. In that dry place God created trees, flowers, and every creature that creeps upon the earth. God put us in the middle of that space, and God stayed there with us. Even then, the stormy waters still surrounded the place of order. Those are the places of chaos and danger where God's order does not exist. And we are reminded of those places when God's people find themselves in peril on the sea -- Noah in the ark, Jonah being tossed overboard, Paul being shipwrecked on the way to Rome, and certainly here, with the disciples in danger on the Sea of Galilee.

We might wonder why a choppy lake would have brought to mind these fears of chaos. After all, it is not the ocean. It was only an inland lake. But it can actually get pretty rough out there. When I was in high school, my family took a trip to Germany and Switzerland, and the day before we were to return home from Zurich we spent a day in the town of Interlaken. The town sits between two lakes of turquoise blue water, each of which is surrounded on all sides by high, snow-capped mountains. It was sunny and hot that afternoon, so my sister and I decided that we'd go for a sail. I wasn't a great sailor, but I'd been on a Sunfish or two, so I figured I knew enough. We rented a small dingy and set out. Very quickly, the wind began to pick up. As it turns out, the cool, dry air on the surrounding mountains, and the warm, moist air down near the lake can make for some very interesting weather. Sometimes it causes winds to whip up and descend upon the lakes, turning their calm bluish-green waters into froth in the blink of an eye. That is exactly what happened to us.

When it did, I knew immediately that we were in trouble. The winds deviated second by second, whipping the sail back and forth violently and without warning. As best I could, I made our way toward the dock, where the man who had very happily rented us his boat a few minutes

earlier was now frantically motioning us to get back in quick. I pointed the bow right toward him, and when I slammed the hull against the rock jetty next to his dock, I was not concerned at all about my sailing form. I was only a bit more concerned about our security deposit. Mostly I was just relieved that my sister and I were off that boat and back on dry land.

The Sea of Galilee is much the same. It is surrounded by hills. They are certainly not as tall as majestic as the Alps, but the lake lies 680 feet below sea level, and the hills on the opposite side – in the country of the Gerasenes, to use Mark’s terminology, can reach up to 2,000 feet. It is much cooler on their slopes. By contrast, the climate on the banks of the Sea of Galilee is amazingly tropical – there are even orchards of banana trees here and there. So you have the same combination of warmth on the lake and cool air on the surrounding hills. The effect of the clashing air currents is also increased because the water is much shallower, meaning that much less wind is required to get the waters churning. Storms can arise quickly and without warning, and the experienced fishermen in Jesus’ group knew well that small boats caught out on the Sea would be in immediate danger.¹

In a storm like this, the craziest thing they could do would be to leave that boat. And yet, that is the very thing Peter feels led to do. It’s amazing, I think, that this idea originates with Peter. Jesus didn’t ask him to do it. It wasn’t Jesus’ idea for Peter to climb over the side into the chaos, but something deep within the apostle Peter told him that he needed to get out. He needed to get closer to the person out on the waves. Something told him to get out of the boat.

It was a crazy impulse. At this point, the disciples weren’t even sure that it was Jesus out there. They thought it might be a phantom, some kind of ghost or fearful spirit. Even if it wasn’t a ghost, the storm was more than enough to terrify the disciples. Peter knew that, if he got out of the boat, there was no going back. He knew he better be sure. So he called out – “Jesus, if it really is you, tell me to come out there.” In the midst of the storm, the apostle Peter, the bravest and boldest of the disciples, was willing to step out in faith.

It’s almost as if Peter wanted Jesus to give him a challenge. Note that he didn’t say, “Jesus, if it is you, wave to us.” “Jesus, if it is you, tell me what we had for supper last night.” Peter doesn’t even ask Jesus to calm the storm. No, the proof that Peter wanted from Jesus was for Jesus to ask something huge from Peter, to ask for something that no one would expect. “Jesus, if it is you,” Peter says, “give me a big job. Give me something amazing to do.”

It is my prayer that we will emulate this example of discipleship as we continue with our strategic planning process. I hope that we will ask Jesus to ask something great from us. I hope that our call to Jesus will be more than “Jesus, if it is you, then make us more comfortable.” I hope that, instead, we will ask Jesus for a challenge... that we will ask Jesus to command us out of the safety of this boat to walk in some ways that the world would never expect. And I hope that we will remember, that if we are courageous enough in what we ask for, that God will never let us sink.

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

¹ <http://christiananswers.net/q-eden/ednk-seaofgalilee.html>