

Twelfth Sunday – June 21, 2015

Storms stir up frequently, even today, at the Sea of Galilee, the scene for today's gospel of the "Stilling of the Storm." Storms there are the result of dramatic differences in temperatures between the shoreline (680 feet below sea level) and the surrounding hills (reaching to a high of 2,000 feet). The strong winds that funnel through the hills easily whip up waves in the relatively shallow waters (only 200 feet deep).

A storm at sea, and at night, could be terrifying even for experienced fishermen. But Jesus is calm. Beyond calm. He was in the stern, "asleep on a cushion." We might call this "untroubled sleep," signaling trust in God's protection even in the direst circumstances.

Allow me to say that this story has proven to be very helpful to many people I've met through the years. Everyone faces stormy times, when waves break over the boats of our lives. Living with a boatload of storms can easily cause us to scream out along with the disciples in today's gospel: "Do you not care that we are perishing?"

Jesus' response is important. He doesn't scold. He doesn't dismiss our terror. Instead he demonstrates both his immense love for us and his awesome power over all our fears by simply speaking three words: "Peace, be still." And the winds cease.

What is Jesus communicating here? Well, a few things. It's not that he doesn't understand how all-consuming fear can be. He will experience it himself in his agony in the garden. But, just as he trusted his Father there, we are invited to do the same. Jesus desires us to know that he has not come to harm us; he always comes in love.

A healthy fear may remind fishermen to guard against events like an unexpected storm, but in the spiritual life fear can lead to paralysis, to the loss of trust, to the crushing of hope. One of the most common struggles in the spiritual life is a feeling of God's absence during painful times. Even some of the saints report this. Why is this experience so common? Perhaps because when we are struggling, we tend to focus only on the area of pain. It's natural to do so, of course, but it makes it more difficult to see where God might be at work in other places, where God is not asleep on a cushion.

That's why we can take heart in the finale of this gospel story when there was a great calm. Can we hear Jesus saying to us: "Why not come into the calm?" Why not indeed?

Most of us know that there are some unnecessary things that prevent us from living more contemplatively, extraneous tasks and events and dates and appointments that can be thrown overboard. Do we have to make everyone happy by agreeing to every request? Not everyone can jettison tasks in this way. A new mother or father can't simply stop rising in the middle of the night to change a crying infant. A person caring for an elderly parent can't simply walk out of that boat.

Yet, can we hear Jesus inviting us to more calm in our stormy lives? Even Jesus needed to take time alone to pray. Listen to him. He says to you and to me: "why not come into the calm?" Why not indeed?