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The Gospel of Luke
XXVI. Who Then Is This?
Luke 8:22-25

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There are three questions asked in our passage – each successive question of increasing importance for the living out of our discipleship, as we follow the Way and the Truth and the Life of our Lord and Savior Jesus.¹ Our passage begins with Jesus telling His disciples that it is time for them to go across to the other side of the lake. The text doesn't explain why Jesus wants to do this – but it is a disciple's job to follow the Master wherever He leads. So, the disciples hop in the boat with Jesus to make the crossing.

They set out, Jesus is sleeping, when suddenly a great storm breaks out. The wind begins to howl, lightning, thunder, large and turbulent waves of water, the boat filling up and in danger of being overturned. The disciples, fearing for their lives, wake Jesus from His slumber with the first of our three questions: *“Master, Master, we are perishing!”* Okay, technically it is not a question. But the question is right there beneath the disciples' cry of alarm – not just, *“Master, we are perishing,”* but also, *“Don't you care, Jesus?”* And perhaps also, *“Why is this happening to us – we're with Jesus?”*

It is a question that runs the length and breadth of the Bible, as well as the length and breadth of our own human experience. Think of Job trying to figure out how such bad things could be happening to such a good person. Think of the Psalmist, amid some storms of his own, crying out, *“Why are you sleeping, O Lord? Rouse yourself! Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?”*² And it is a question we have found, at times, on our own lips and in our own hearts. Something, perhaps, along the lines of, *“We're Christians, right? So why didn't Jesus protect us from this sickness, this loss, this pain, this heartbreak – or any of the other storms that blow into our lives?”* That's what we expect from Jesus – protection! That is what we assume is His job in return for our faith – no bad things to happen to us, ever!

But Jesus never promised us that sort of all-encompassing, magical protection in return for our faith. Read the Bible carefully – that promise is just not there. In fact, it is Jesus who tells us that the rain falls on both the just and the unjust³ – that the ordinary trials of human existence in this fallen world are not excluded from our lives just because we are Christians. Christianity is not a blanket immunity clause, not a get out of jail free card, not an invisibility cloak or Superman's cape. That which befalls all humankind – those ordinary storms of human existence in this fallen world – will fall also upon those who belong to Jesus. That's what we learn from seeing even the disciples of Jesus caught in a terrifying storm.

But actually, it is even more than that. It is something else Jesus said, something else that is right there as we see the disciples of Jesus caught in that storm. Which is that the only reason the disciples are in this storm in the first place is because they are following Jesus. If they weren't following Jesus, they would all be home and safely asleep in their beds. But there they are, following Jesus – Jesus right there in the boat with them – when the storm comes along. Jesus not only does not spare us from the ordinary storms of human existence, but there are certain storms we enter into solely because we are following Jesus – He leads us into them through the very fact that we are His disciples. He warned us about this. He told us that the path of discipleship is not the easy road, it is not the wide gate.⁴ That it involves things like forgiving as we have been forgiven⁵, even loving our enemies⁶; things like turning the other cheek⁷, sharing what we have with those in need⁸, not being conformed to the world⁹, putting His Kingdom first in our priorities above even earthly security¹⁰. In fact, that it involves picking up a cross of our own and bearing it for Him in the world.¹¹ Following Jesus – if we are really trying to follow Jesus – will sometimes set us at odds with the world; at odds with what everyone else is thinking or doing; at odds even with the people closest to us. Put us into a storm, so to speak, of Jesus' own making.

My teacher, John Leith, once addressed this theme with the congregation of the First Presbyterian Church of Auburn, Alabama:

It is hard to be a Christian. But after all, it is about time that we should get into our thinking that the business of being Christian is and always will be an arduous and dangerous business. It is not made for cowards and the weak. In the past, people died martyr's deaths for their faith. Today, none of us is in any danger of a martyr's death, but we shall have to face up to the scorn of friends and the displeasure of a vast segment of our society if we are to be really Christian.¹²

By way of context, he was preaching those words in 1949, on what was then known as Race Relations Sunday.

So, our first question would disabuse us of any false notion of magical protection from life's storms, would remind us that following Jesus sometimes comes with an invitation to follow Him into a storm. But the second question in our passage is even tougher. Jesus wakes up and, with apparently very little fuss or drama, simply rebukes the wind and the waves – simply tells them to “knock it off” – and immediately they cease. Now, it would be great if this story ended right there – because then it could just be a story about, “Well, sometimes storms come along – but all you have to do is call on Jesus and He will make the storms immediately go away!” But the story doesn't end there. In fact, what follows is, for the disciples and also for us, even more disturbing than the storm. Jesus rebukes the wind and the waves, turns to His disciples – and then rebukes them: “*Where is your faith?*” Not a word about the storm, not a word about the water still pooling at their feet, not even an acknowledgment that they almost lost their lives back there a moment ago. No, Jesus rebukes His disciples, asking them, “*Where is your faith?*”

Think about that for a moment. Terrible storm, wind and waves, scared to death and about to die, calling out to Jesus for help – and then getting a strong rebuke. It doesn't add up, does it?

Isn't that exactly what we are supposed to do – as an act of our faith – to call out to Jesus in the midst of the storm? “*Where is your faith?*” says Jesus. Jesus, we want to answer back, our faith is the whole reason we were crying out to you in the first place. How can it be wrong to call out to Jesus to help us in the storm? How does that demonstrate a lack of faith? Clearly, we are missing something here. I mean, does Jesus really expect that what the disciples should have done in that storm, and what we ought to do in ours, is simply to crawl to the back of the boat and start napping with Jesus, not a care in the world, while the storm rages on? Is that what He expects?

Apparently, yes. Or at least something like that. I mean, the only explanation for Jesus' rebuke is that the disciples should have known by now that they were ultimately safe as long as they were with Him – no matter the wind and the waves. The disciples, by now, should have had enough trust in Jesus – having seen all the mighty acts and healings and exorcisms He had done so far – they should have had enough trust in Him to know that while He would not prevent them from being in the storm, that He would prevent the storm from taking them beyond His care, beyond His power to save them, beyond the reach of His love for them. Jesus expected them, not so much not to be afraid at all – a storm is and always will be a frightening thing – but He expected them, even in their fear, to trust Him more than they feared the storm.

For that's what faith really is – trust. Not so much believing things about God, so much as letting those things we believe about God build up in us personal trust in God. Peter Marty, a Lutheran pastor and editor of the Christian Century magazine, tells of trying to teach his four-year-old daughter how to float on her back in the swimming pool. He would put one hand beneath her spine, the other beneath her legs, and tell her just to relax and float. But every time he would remove his hands, he says, her body would tense up into a V-shape and start to sink.

And Marty then uses that illustration to speak about faith as being about trust – trust in the One who holds us in the palms of His hands always. Marty writes this: “*Faith is investing in or trusting the totality of our lives to God. It's what theologian James Alison refers to as relaxing in the presence of someone whom we're confident is fond of us.*” And then he adds:

Our little Rachel eventually learned how to lessen her panic enough to begin floating more easily. It didn't happen because she strained harder. It happened because she loved that strong, friendly guy in the pool and knew that he was fond of her.¹³

Knew that he could be trusted not to abandon her, and not to let her drown. Like the disciples should have known, and should have trusted Jesus in the midst of that storm – as frightening as it was.

“*Where is your faith?*” Jesus asks of the disciples, and of you and me. Because faith is knowing, trusting that God is always going to be with us in that storm. And knowing and trusting that He, who is so very fond of us, will not abandon us to the storm, will never leave us to face the storm alone, will never let that storm overwhelm us entirely. “*The eternal God is our dwelling place,*” says Moses, “*and beneath us always are the everlasting arms.*”¹⁴ Such that even in the midst of the storm, we can possess a sense of peace – His peace.¹⁵ Even in the midst of the storm, because of our trust in Him – born of our knowledge and past experience of His goodness and love

towards us – we can know and trust that we are going to be okay. Know and trust that all things are ultimately going to be okay. Know and trust that, because we are in the boat with Jesus, we really can just “keep calm and carry on.”

Which brings us to the third and final question – the biggest and best of them all. The disciples sitting there waterlogged and wet, having left behind their initial panic – “*Master, don’t you care that we are about to drown?*” – and having received from Jesus that strong rebuke – “*Where is your faith?*” – the disciples have now found something new and even greater to ponder: “*Who then is this, that he commands even winds and water, and they obey him?*” They have just seen Jesus, their teacher and friend, do something which only God can do – command the wind and water, and instantly they obey! “*Who then is this?*” They have just learned that Jesus is none other than the One who “*sits enthroned over the flood,*” as the Psalmist put it in our responsive reading.¹⁶ They have just learned that Jesus will not only never abandon them to the storm (question number two), but that Jesus will also always bring them safely through the storm – because He is mightier by far than even the winds and the waves.

“*Who then is this?*” He is the One who will never let any storm snatch us away from His presence, His power to save us, His plan and purpose for our lives. He is the One who is infinitely bigger and more powerful than any storm we are in, bigger and more powerful than any storm that could ever break in upon our lives. He is the One who, in the end, will always bring us through. “*Who then is this?*” He is God Almighty, our God who loves us and wills only good for us, and who has promised to bring all things round to good for us¹⁷. Our God, who is always bigger and more powerful than the storm.

I love this story. In C. S. Lewis’s Narnia novel, Prince Caspian, there is a scene where the children find themselves back in the land of Narnia after a long absence. But Aslan, the great lion and king, and the Christ-figure in these novels, is nowhere to be found. Lucy, the youngest child, especially longs to see him. And one night, as the children are asleep, Lucy is awakened by a great stirring in the forest, and by a voice calling to her from out of the woods. She follows the sound until she comes upon a clearing:

A circle of grass, smooth as a lawn, met her eyes, with dark trees dancing all round it. And then – oh joy! For he was there: the huge Lion, shining white in the moonlight, with his huge black shadow underneath him.

But for the movement of his tail he might have been a stone lion, but Lucy never thought of that. She never stopped to think whether he was a friendly lion or not. She rushed to him. She felt her heart would burst if she lost a moment. And the next thing she knew was that she was kissing him and putting her arms as far round his neck as she could and burying her face in the beautiful rich silkiness of his mane.

“Aslan, Aslan. Dear Aslan,” sobbed Lucy. “At last” . . .

“Welcome, child,” he said.

“Aslan,” said Lucy, “you’re bigger.”

“That is because you are older, little one,” answered he.

*“Not because you are?”
 “I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me
 bigger.”¹⁸*

And in every storm we must face, we will find that He is bigger than that storm, more powerful than the wind and waves. And that He will bring us through – bring us safely through.

Three questions. *“Master, don’t you care that we are perishing?”* Yes, of course He cares – but He also tells us that the storms will nonetheless come – even come upon us sometimes because we are following Him. *“Where is your faith?”* But in those storms, we may trust Him, trust in His presence with us in the midst of those storms. Knowing that He is with us in the storm; knowing that He will never forsake us in the storm – such that we can endure the storms with peace, His peace, guarding our hearts and minds and abating our fears. *“Who then is this?”* Because ultimately, we do know who He is, the One who is with us in the storm. He is the One whose power and might will always prove bigger than the fury of the storm. He is the One who guards us and keeps and will preserve our lives forevermore.

¹ John 14:6.

² Psalm 44:23-24.

³ Matthew 5:45. See also John 16:33.

⁴ Matthew 7:13-14.

⁵ Matthew 6:12, 14-15.

⁶ Matthew 5:43-48.

⁷ Matthew 5:39.

⁸ Matthew 5:42.

⁹ Romans 12:2.

¹⁰ Matthew 6:25-33.

¹¹ Matthew 16:24-26.

¹² John H. Leith, “On Mistaking the Clean for the Unclean,” in Pilgrimage of a Presbyterian: Collected Shorter Writings, ed., Charles E. Raynal (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2001), p. 19.

¹³ Peter W. Marty, “Relaxing into faith,” Christian Century, Vol. 138, No. 14 (July 14, 2001), p. 3.

¹⁴ Deuteronomy 33:27.

¹⁵ John 14:27.

¹⁶ Psalm 29:10.

¹⁷ Romans 8:28.

¹⁸ C. S. Lewis, Prince Caspian (New York: Collier Books, 1970), p. 135-136.