

**12th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B
20 June 2021**

“They rejoiced that...he brought them to their desired haven”

Storms are the common theme uniting our Scripture readings today. Psalm 107 describes a great oceanic storm; in our reading from Job, God speaks out of a storm to declare his authority over the oceans; and in the Gospel, Jesus demonstrates that divine authority by calming the sea. In the wake of those stormy passages, I’d like to share with you the details of two storms that my wife, Christine, and I have gone through.

The first took place many years ago on a research trip to the Leeward Islands of Hawaii. We were on Laysan Island, a tiny speck of coral almost a thousand miles northwest of Honolulu, home to albatross, sea turtles and endangered monk seals. When our field work on Laysan was done, the *Golden Eagle*, a 52-foot fishing boat, picked us up to bring us to Tern Island, an even smaller speck of coral about 350 miles away. The trip should have taken just under two days.

Shortly after clearing the reef around Laysan, however, a storm began brewing and within two hours, half of our research crew was seasick. Waves washed over the railings and the stern, and as darkness fell, the seas grew even rougher. When a gray and ragged dawn broke, we had our first glimpse of how big the seas had gotten. Atop the crests, you could see forever, but down in the troughs, it felt like being in the bottom of a watery canyon—just as Psalm 107 described it: “A storm wind...tossed its waves on high. They mounted up to heaven; they sank to the depths.”

The scariest moment came in the blackness of the second night when we suddenly slammed into a rogue wave. It felt like we had run

head-on into a wall—cabinets broke open, gear flew out, the hatch to the engine room popped open, and water was swirling everywhere. The captain cursed, vaulted out of his bunk, took the helm from the mate, and checked down to 4 knots, which was safer, but slowed our progress to a crawl. After about 50 hours, Christine and I were both sea-sick, but we didn't have the worst of it. One colleague broke her nose and a tooth when she was thrown out of her bunk, and another colleague tore ligaments in her knee during the storm.

Finally, after three brutal nights at sea, we reached Tern Island. The fishing boat couldn't dock, so a Zodiac came out to pick us up, and the crews briefed us on how to disembark—by waiting until the swells lifted the Zodiac to the same level as the deck of the *Golden Eagle*. Christine, however, was so eager to get off that fishing boat that she just launched as soon as she could, even as the Zodiac was dropping away into a trough; she managed to cop about 8 feet of air on her way down. Within minutes, we were on *terra firma*, and just like the mariners in Psalm 107, “We rejoiced that... [the Lord] brought [us] to [our] desired haven,” and we gave “thanks to the Lord for his kindness”!

This past winter, Christine and I endured another, very different, kind of storm—a storm of misfortune and sorrow. In late January, my mom had a stroke; at about the same time, my dad needed surgery to remove a skin cancer from around his eye. While recovering from the subsequent facial reconstruction surgery, he lost his balance, fell, broke his nose, knocked himself out, and had a seizure as the EMTs wheeled him to the ambulance. Days later, Christine's dad in Florida fell and broke his hip, which ultimately sabotaged our plans to move him up here to Wisconsin. By then, my dad had been discharged from the

hospital into a skilled nursing care facility, but just days later, he died in his sleep. Because of COVID, we were unable to attend his funeral. Christine was eventually able to get down to Florida to see her dad, but the day after she returned home to Wisconsin, he was rushed to the hospital and had emergency surgery for an incarcerated hernia.

I share these details with you, not to elicit sympathy, but rather to illustrate a simple truth—over the course of our lives, many of us will go through such storms. Consider Job, a righteous man with a prosperous and peaceful life until he suddenly lost his family, his wealth, and his health in rapid succession. Just like Job, we can be suddenly engulfed in a sea of unexpected sorrow and loss. Such calamities can happen to anybody—the person next to you in the pews, the person in front of you at the store, the folks down the block, your own family. The storms of life can be devastating and unrelenting—violence, betrayal, divorce, addiction, bankruptcy, unemployment, foreclosure, eviction, disease, and death.

Where is God when the stormy waves of sorrow and misfortune try to swamp our fragile lives? Same place he was with his disciples on the Sea of Galilee. He's in the back of the boat, going through it with us, even when things seem most dire. When Jesus' disciples panicked, Scripture tells us that he "was in the stern, asleep on a cushion. They woke him and said to him 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?' He woke up, rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Quiet! Be still!' The wind ceased and there was a great calm. Then he asked them, 'Why are you terrified? Do you not yet have faith?'"

The disciples were concerned that Jesus had abandoned them, that he was literally sleeping on the job. In reality, however, he's so

good at taking care of us that he can do it even in his sleep. So, when we don't discern God working in our lives, even when we feel that he has abandoned us, we are still always in his hands, for not even a sparrow drops to the earth without God knowing it.

Of course, like the disciples, we may struggle to trust God through life's difficulties and tragedies. But we have good reason to trust Jesus because he's not just in the back of the boat watching over us. He is also side-by-side with us, in solidarity with us, having endured vicious storms of his own. He, too, was overwhelmed by a sea of grief, but tenaciously trusted in his heavenly Father when his life was on the line. When his disciples betrayed and abandoned him, the leaders of his own people orchestrated his death, and their oppressors collaborated in his torture and crucifixion, even when he felt abandoned on the Cross and cried out with the opening line of Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me," he still trusted. Jesus knew in his heart that, just like the second half of Psalm 22 says, "God did not turn his face away from him, but when he cried out to him, he heard him."

In other words, Jesus did not resort to his own power and will, and miraculously free himself from the Cross. Instead, he trusted even then that his Father would rescue him in the end, even if that end was on the far side of death. So Jesus stayed the course upon the Cross, like a skipper with his hands outstretched at the helm steering through the stormiest of seas. Like a captain refusing to abandon his ship, Christ rode the Cross into the depths—the depths of pain, loneliness, failure, and death, to the godforsaken abyss of hell itself—clinging all the while to that profound trust in his Father, the Father who then drew him up out of the depths and raised him to the light of new life.

So, when we are in the midst of the storm and it seems that there is no way out, when we are tempted to despair, thinking the Father has abandoned us, we must pray for the faith to trust as Jesus himself did, knowing that the storm *will* be calmed—either in this life or, sometimes, through death itself—as long as we trust in the Lord’s great love for us.

The tragic tale of the *Edmund Fitzgerald* provides one last lesson for us. On that fateful November day in 1975, there were two lake freighters carrying iron ore across Lake Superior. The second ship was the *Arthur Anderson*, the last vessel to be in radio and radar contact with the *Edmund Fitzgerald*. After being nearly inundated by two monster waves itself, the *Anderson* finally made it to safety in the shelter of Whitefish Point. But when the Coast Guard contacted the *Anderson*’s captain, asking him to go back out into the killer storm to search for the *Edmund Fitzgerald*, he dared to do just that.

There may come a time in our own lives when God makes a similar request of us. Even as we confront our own storms and seek refuge from the chaos of unwelcome crisis, God may call us back out to help rescue and provide safe harbor for somebody else. We may be the life raft for some other lost soul at risk of going down. So even as we struggle to keep our own heads above water, there is almost certainly somebody we know who is in even more dire straits. If we can wholeheartedly place our faith in the Lord and cling to Him without reservation, then not only will He save us from the storm, but He may use us to rescue others, as he strives to bring all of his lost crews home—to an eternal home where “He shall wipe every tear from [our] eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for all these things [will] have passed away.”