

## VICTORY AT SEA?

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*He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” (Mark 4:40)*

I lead a relatively safe life. With my office located in the rectory, I confess that I don't have much of a commute. In fact, I don't have any commute at all and some days I have to manufacture excuses just to go outside. Take last Friday for example, June 11<sup>th</sup>. The riskiest thing I did all day was go to the farmer's market at Union Square without wearing a facemask. Did I absolutely need to go? Of course not. We already had enough apples, but it was a beautiful day and I wanted to experience the great outdoors. I wanted to live on the edge.

Some people definitely lived an edgier June 11<sup>th</sup> than I did. On the same day as my daredevil adventure to Union Square, a Cape Cod lobster diver named Michael Packard began his commute by descending 45-feet to the ocean floor. What happened next I give you in Packard's own words: *“I was descending. I almost got to the bottom. I was at about 35 feet. And I just got hit by a freight truck. Just this ‘bang!’ And then everything just went instantly dark. And I'm just moving, traveling fast through the water, and I'm like ‘what the heck – did I just get eaten by a shark?’ And I was like ‘no, sharks mouths aren't that big, and I don't feel any teeth. Oh, great, I didn't get eaten by a shark! But, I'm in a whale's mouth.’”*<sup>1</sup>

Packard still could breathe through his oxygen tank, and he guesses that he spent 30 or 40 seconds in the whale's mouth. Meanwhile, on the deck of the boat his fishing partner, Josiah Mayo, was watching strange turbulence in the water. Mayo reports, *“I just saw a huge boil, splashing, slashing all over the water. And I thought, ‘oh, man, this is it, this is that shark attack that we're always, you know, worried about. Then I saw whale parts ... and I knew it wasn't a shark attack ... Then Michael shot out of the water. I could see his little legs kind of flying out of ... an eruption of whitewater.”*

Packard got lucky. A humpback whale is anatomically incapable of swallowing a human, so it spit him out the way any of us would expel some disagreeable food from our mouths. Packard received only minor injuries, and by the next Wednesday he was in Los Angeles telling his tale on 'Jimmy Kimmel Live.' *“I want to apologize to the whale for getting in its way,”* Packard declared. *“I won't ever do it again.”* So we're back to my original observation. Michael Packard and I lead very different lives. Never once have I feared being hit by a whale on my commute to work.

What follows is a sermon about fear and faith. Jesus said, *“Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”* In the days of Jesus, people had much to fear, just as we today have much to fear. But for people then, the perfect symbol for all that they should dread was the sea. The sea was the most powerful, mysterious force on earth. Great monsters lived in it. Terrible storms whipped up upon it. The land of the dead existed under it. The water – the wild, uncontrollable, unpredictable sea – was the sum of all fears. For the fisherman trying to make a living on the sea, the sudden violent storms on the water perfectly symbolized life itself. Just as death, disease, hardship, famine and war would turn the fortunes of people in an instant, so would the mood of the sea turn angry, sink boats, ruin livelihoods, and swallow up lives. The sea was to be feared.

Now bring all this to bear on today's reading from the Gospel of Mark (4:35-41). Mark describes how Jesus and his disciples were rowing a boat across the Sea of Galilee. Behind them

on land was a storm – a storm of people that had been following the little group wherever they went. The crowds at times were hostile, as crowds often will be. They pressed in on Jesus almost crushing him on several occasions, trying to get close to him for healing and wisdom. Some in the crowd were plotting deliberately to crush him. They were Pharisees – the religious authorities – who didn't like Jesus' invading their turf. We can imagine how Jesus and the disciples were exhausted from the constant whirling winds of the crowd. Perhaps it was out of self-preservation that Jesus announced that they should head across the Sea of Galilee to the other side.

What the disciples and Jesus didn't know was that as they rowed away from the storm on land, they were heading right into another storm at sea. Mark tells us how a great windstorm arose and began battering the boat, threatening to sink it. It would take all hands working together if they were to survive, so the disciples called out to Jesus, who was oddly enough, asleep in the stern. "Teacher", they said, "do you not care that we are perishing?" Well, as luck would have it, he did care. Jesus awoke, rebuked the wind and commanded the turbulent, angry sea to settle into a still, quiet calm. It was a miracle that left such an impression on the disciples that they told and retold the story. For them it was the epitome of what it was like to be in the presence of Jesus. Jesus was and is able to calm the storms of life. Fear not. Have faith.

Now then, it's all well and good to say that Jesus brings victory at sea, but the fact remains that the storms around us still rage and swell. Last summer my family and I were on vacation in Lake Placid, NY, staying in a little place overlooking Mirror Lake. One day my son James wanted to rent kayaks. I agreed, even though I have never enjoyed a single minute I have spent in a kayak. To me, kayaks are a clumsy, uncomfortable, inefficient way to cross the water. The only thing more ridiculous than a kayak would be one of those stand-up paddle boards. But I digress. The procedure at the rental place was to get in the kayak on the dock, and then some tanned and burly deckhand would push you down a ramp and into the water. James went first, straight in, and began paddling away.

When it was my turn, the deckhand put some English on the push. I hit the water at an angle, and despite my frantic attempts to right the ship, I *reeled and staggered like a drunkard (Ps. 107:27)*. Soon I was in the drink. With great dignity I reassembled myself, climbed into the kayak without the assistance of the tanned and burly punk on deck, and soon was catching up to James. Then on the other side of the lake a great storm of wind arose. It whipped up waves I wouldn't have thought possible on a glorified pond named Mirror Lake. The whole way back to the dock was a decidedly unpleasant experience that I thought would never end, and I cursed the headwind as Job cursed the day he was born. True, I lead a relatively safe life, but on that day the water got the better of me. It was not victory at sea, but humiliation at sea. It was metaphor of how stormy life can be.

Just ask Job. Job, as you likely know, was a righteous man who enjoyed smooth sailing through life. He had a happy family and wealth beyond anyone's imagination. Then the storm hit, furiously and relentlessly. Invading armies attacked his family, killing them all and plundering his wealth. Job himself fell ill to a painful and debilitating disease. What was the reason for the suffering and hardship? Job's friends reasoned that bad things happen only to bad people. Job, therefore, must have sinned to bring on the storm. Job disagreed. He'd done nothing wrong, and demanded answers from God. But God, like Jesus, seemed to be asleep in the back of the boat. Fear not? Have faith?

Yes, fear not and have faith. Despite the storms of life the Psalmist (139:8-9) was able to sing of God: *If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand will lead me and your right hand hold me fast.* What could he have meant? Perhaps the answer lies literally in the stern of the storm-tossed fishing boat on the Sea of Galilee.

What was Jesus was doing in the midst of the storm that had everyone else utterly and completely terrified? Jesus was sleeping. Today I want to preach not so much Christ crucified, or Christ risen from the dead, but Christ sleeping. Apparently, he even managed to find a little pillow! To me, that Jesus was taking a nap during the storm may be a grander miracle than stilling the storm itself. He simply wasn't worried. He wasn't afraid of the storm's power. Jesus sleeping says to me that he had and has a perspective on the storms of life that the others did not – that I do not – that you do not. Jesus gives the storm a big yawn, suggesting that the raging, foaming crises that terrify us will never in the end be able to sever us from the love of God. Jesus asked the disciples: “Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?” It's as if he said to them, “Relax, I've got this. I've got *you!*”

Likewise, we heard in our Old Testament reading how God finally answered Job (38:1-11) out of the whirlwind. What I take God to be saying is something like this: *Job, this existence that I've chosen to share with you as a gift is a far bigger thing than you can either understand or imagine. You just have to trust me. I've got this, and you don't.* So today's counter-cultural Word of the Lord is this: be like Jesus and take a nap. Get some sleep. Find yourself a pillow. *If I dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there God's right hand will hold me fast.* God has got us and won't let go.

Normally, whenever I reach for ways to illustrate the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, or the love of God, or the fellowship of the Holy Spirit I would never dare to cast myself in the role of God. But since today is Father's Day perhaps you will grant me lenience. What does it mean that God's right hand holds us fast? One of the most frightening things ever to happen to me occurred years ago when my family was spending a week at the beach. Luke was only three at the time, and not yet a swimmer, so he had a healthy, instinctive desire to keep a good distance between himself and the crashing waves of the ocean. One beautiful day the two of us were digging in the sand. When it was time to go back to the house we were slathered with sun screen and badly in need of a rinse. I carried Luke to the water. We waded into the surf, only about waist high on me. For some reason I turned briefly and looked towards the beach. Then with Luke still in my arms I turned back to face the water, and there to my horror saw that a wave higher than my head had assembled itself and was about to hit us like a truck. I knew in an instant that it was going to be bad, that the wave would knock me off my feet, and that if I lost hold of Luke I might lose him forever.

In the split second before the wave crashed upon us, all I could do was wrap my fingers around Luke's ankle, and vow that I would hold on no matter what happened. The wave hit with every bit of angry fury I expected. Just, *Bang!* It sent me sprawling in a free-fall. Down I went into the raging, foaming waters that I could feel almost willfully trying to wrench Luke's ankle out of my hands. Down I went to the bottom, scraping the sand and broken shells until finally being spit up on the beach. Through it all I held Luke's ankle in my right hand like a vice grip. When the wave finally receded, Luke was not a happy 3-year old. Not one bit. I had lost my expensive sun glasses, but not my son. I had latched on and would not let go.

How much more must our Father who is in heaven vow to hold onto you, and me, and all of his children. God holds our souls in life. God has got us and won't let go. Fear not. Have faith.

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<sup>1</sup> Quotes from Packard and Mayo are taken from “I Want to Apologize to the Whale,” by Eric Williams. *Cape Cod Times*, June 17, 2021.