

Stormy Weather: A Homiletic Essay

By Maggi Dawn | Volume 2.1 Fall 2015

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In my home country of England, you are never more than seventy-four miles from the coast, so wherever you live it is possible to get to the sea in a day. At different points in my life I have lived close to coastline overlooked by huge cliffs, or by long, shallow beaches that extend across bleak mudflats. There is something therapeutic about the salty smell and the beating of waves on the shore—perhaps because that liminal space between land and sea opens up a sense of possibility. On a beach, our defined, landlocked life encounters the edge of an uncontrollable freedom; we are reminded of endless possibility, but also that we are not as much in control as we might like to think. Therapeutic though a beach may be, the wildness of the sea is not to be underestimated.

My father served in the Royal Navy during the Second World War, and had the misfortune never completely to get his sea legs. I remember him telling funny stories about journeys through choppy waters, and how he learned to fend off seasickness by avoiding looking at the waves or the boat, instead keeping his eyes fixed on the horizon. Years later, in the days before you could take a train from London to France, his advice served me well on many a ferry trip across the English Channel. What my father never mentioned until I was much older, though, was the life-threatening kind of storm in which the sea, the sky and the rain all blend into one grey mess, and you can't see the horizon at all.

I experienced just such a storm when, in my early twenties, I went to live in a small town on the edge of a Norwegian fjord. My new friends were amazed to discover that, despite coming from a maritime nation, I had never been fishing at sea. Determined to correct this lack in my experience, they took me with them the next time they set out to fish. We stowed our waterproofs and sweaters as it was a warm, dry day, and set out on smooth seas as the sun glinted on the gently moving water beneath the boat. Out on the water we set up various nets and lines, and the degree of excitement I felt at my first catch far outweighed the size of the fish on the end of the line, which was deemed too small to keep.

After some hours, quite suddenly the sun faded, the sky turned grey, and the captain announced that we should pack up urgently and head for home. Within the space of a few minutes, the sea turned angry, the clouds grew dark and forbidding, and the rain began to come down in sheets. The horizon blurred so that you couldn't tell where the rain ended and the sea began.

The fishermen went into emergency mode, tying us all on to the boat, and we headed towards land, lurching from side to side in enormous waves. Too numb to feel fear, I remember willing the storm to subside, trying in vain to find a point of focus to stop my head from spinning. A long time later when we came in to land, the quayside was lined with people waiting with blankets and hot drinks. As we stepped ashore, I saw the anxiety and relief in the faces of the waiting women, and wondered how often they had stood there, scanning the horizon. I had sung countless times the hymn for naval and fishing boats. Now I felt more starkly what it meant to cry out "for those in peril on the sea."

In the early chapters of his gospel, Mark tells a series of stories about Jesus and the disciples crossing the Sea of Galilee, several times rowing through terrifying storms. The Sea of Galilee is actually a huge lake—fourteen miles long, three miles wide at the narrow point, and seven miles across at the widest place. On a calm day it doesn't take long for experienced fishermen to cross it, but in a fierce storm, a stretch of water that size is a dangerous place to be. Mark's writing style is a bit like live TV coverage; he writes in the present continuous tense, giving the sense that he is reporting from a scene that is happening right now. When Mark tells you about a storm, rather than picturing a far distant epic, you actually feel the lurch in your stomach and the spray on your face.

Mark tells of a night when, while the disciples rowed through a fierce storm, Jesus slept undisturbed below deck until, in desperation, they shook him awake. They were unsurprised at his ability to sleep through a violent storm but incredulous that he would seemingly abandon them to its power.^[1] Why, when their lives were in danger, did he do nothing to help? The disciples had run not only into a storm, but into a timeless theological conundrum and one of the biggest stumbling blocks to faith: the unanswered question of why God seems to do nothing when people suffer, to be asleep when the storm is raging, to be curiously absent at our time of deepest need.

Just like God's conversation with Job, however, Jesus offers no explanation, and simply seems surprised at their distress. Their suffering is not explained, and their questions are answered not with a neat theodicy, but only in this: that even though they didn't realize it, he was fully present with them throughout their ordeal.

A couple of chapters later Mark tells of another night when the disciples rowed through a storm.^[2] But this time, when the storm blew up, they could not call on him for help, for Jesus had stayed on shore and gone alone up the mountain to pray. The biblical symbolism of sea and mountains emphasizes the disciples' sense of isolation. Mountains usually represent the revelation of God. The Ten Commandments, the Transfiguration, the Ascension, Moses' personal meeting with God—all of these are literally mountain top moments. But the sea, in biblical imagery, represents the chaos and wickedness of humanity apart from God—hence in heaven there is “no more sea.”^[3] The image is therefore one of extreme alienation: while Jesus is safe in the revealed presence of God, the disciples are at sea, facing the depths of humanity's alienation from themselves and from God.

Dawn was breaking when they looked up and saw Jesus walking towards them across the water. After they had battled the storm for some hours, you might expect them to be relieved and comforted at the sight of Jesus approaching. But just as with Mary on Easter morning^[4] and the disciples on the road to Emmaus,^[5] there was a disruption of perception, and they saw Jesus but did not recognize him. Far from calming them down, his appearance increased their fear, for now they thought that on top of everything else they had to deal with a ghost. Stress and anxiety often impair our perception and our judgment. Sometimes, if we're cast adrift in difficult and alienating circumstances and have to work hard just to stay afloat, we become incapable of recognizing hope when it appears on our horizon. The very thing that is thrown to us as a lifeline initially appears to make matters worse.

This is one of only a few gospel stories in which Jesus seems to step completely outside his human limitations. Each of the gospel writers tells us that Jesus strode across the water. John goes even further and claims that as soon as Jesus was in the boat, they were miraculously transported to the other side of the lake.^[6] It's inconclusive, and not even particularly interesting, to speculate on the historicity of the miracle. Miracles are implausible by nature, and arguing about whether they really happened or whether there is a rational explanation for them is a cul-de-sac—you can never prove it decisively one

way or the other. What is more interesting about this ghostly appearance is that it gives Mark, who doesn't tell any resurrection stories, an opportunity to portray Jesus in an unrecognizable, super-human form. These tough fishermen had bravely faced down wind and waves for several hours, but this strange and ghostly apparition walking across the water strikes fear into their hearts. The moment of recognition comes with Jesus' words: "It is I" But in translation the point can be lost that Jesus is saying something more than just "It's me." The Greek reads *ego eimi*—I am—which clearly connects us back to the stories of naming and identity from Exodus. "Who am I?" asked Moses, but God's reply inverts Moses' question: "I am that I am Say that I am has sent you" [7]

Mark, then, highlights the fact that human and divine are brought together in Jesus. The shimmering figure outside the boat represents the unknowable, unrecognizable presence of God—the God who cannot be grasped, and who creates a storm of fear in our souls. But inside the boat, he becomes recognizable, and everything becomes calm and still. We can't even begin to know God until we accept the paradoxical nature of the encounter—that God is on the one hand limitless and unknowable, and on the other hand made known to us in the practical realities of everyday life. Accepting that we never will understand is, in fact, the beginning of understanding. The knowable and the unknowable have to be held in tension.

Matthew added a postscript to Mark's story, in which he described Peter stepping out of the boat to join Jesus walking on the waves. Matthew gives the impression that Peter was still not completely certain that it was Jesus standing there, but he was prepared to go out on a limb. You might call this a leap of faith—a term coined by Søren Kierkegaard. In the vernacular this is often used to describe a leap into the complete unknown, but Kierkegaard was trying to describe something more like Peter's stepping out of the boat: not an irrational movement into complete darkness, but an attempt to make a connection across the gaps of logic that are inevitable in any system of thought. Kierkegaard's point is that it is futile to try to bridge every gap with logic; instead the connections are made with a leap of faith—a calculated risk based on a probable but unprovable certainty. Peter's hunch was that, despite the mystery that God is to us, God would nonetheless meet him. And so it proved.

These stories of Jesus meeting his disciples in the storm are not the stuff of gentle Sunday School tales. They speak of the worst and most frightening moments in our own lives. When we are in desperate circumstances—threatened with loss of health, shelter, employment, physical safety, or when life itself is being snatched away—the horizon seems to disappear. We long to tie ourselves to something solid in order not to be swept away, yet the most solid thing we can find is as turbulent as a boat on stormy seas.

Faith rests on the promise that, in the worst of life's challenges—when nothing is certain, the transcendent God is unrecognizable, and the familiar Jesus seems to be asleep on the job—God is nonetheless present. We may emerge weather-beaten, but we will discover, eventually, that we have not rowed through the storm alone.



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FOOTNOTES

[1] Mark 4:35-40

[2] Mark 6:45-52

[3] Revelation 21:1

[4] John 20:11-18

[5] Luke 24:13-35

[6] John 6:21

[7] Exodus 3:11,14

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