

Sermon for Epiphany IV – Matthew 8:23-27

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

It was His idea. They were merely following Him into the boat, following Him as He told them to do. They were His disciples, so they followed Him. So this was His idea.

The sky darkened. The waves picked up. The wind and the rain increased. A great storm arose. Waves swamped and hammered the sides of the boat. The entire boat swayed from side to side: each wave threatening to capsize the whole vessel! Water pouring over the sides! Gaped mouths calling out for help only to be filled with another wave of water; gasping for breath! No man, whether fisherman or not, could endure this full-on squall! Where was Jesus? This was His idea!

Where is He? He is asleep. What?!? How is this possible? “Save us, Lord, we are perishing!” And what’s worse – when He does come to, He rebukes them! “Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?”

The storms arise in our lives. Wars and disease, hatred and greed, bigotry and addiction: these things don’t seem right, and yet they are all around us. Crime and poverty. Families falling apart. Babies murdered in their mothers’ wombs. Friends betray us. A country polarized by divergent ideologies. Worries that darken our minds. Loneliness that cloud our hearts. “Save us, Lord, we are perishing!” Where is Jesus? He seems like He’s sleeping; He seems like He’s ignoring us.

It is unfair isn’t it? This was His idea. We go into the boat. He tells us to follow Him, and just when the storm’s at its worst, He’s nowhere to be seen!

Will we leave Him? We are in the ship with Him. We have experienced the storm and the waves. Has He lied to us?

No, He has not. And the truth is in His question: “Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?” We of little faith have faith. We have a faith, little though it is, that God will keep His promises. For a disciple is not above his teacher. What right have *we* to have it so good and have everything according to our wishes when *He* said, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head”? He told us, “In the world you will have tribulation” and “whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.”

Dearly beloved, we are experiencing what the Scriptures teach us: afflictions are necessary for the testing and cleansing of our faith; for helping us to have a right understanding of the world so that we may see it in its true perspective.

How easy it is for us to fall away! How easy it is for us to forget what we once learned and loved! How easy it is to get out of the boat! How easy it is to forsake the Lord, yes, to deny Him! When everything goes well for us, then it’s easy enough to say: “I will die with you,” and mean it. But in hard times, when it does matter, how easily our words become: “I don’t know the Man.”

We see in our darkest moments, when the boat is swamped with waves, we see in our lowest times, we thought we were strong and faithful, but when the test came, what did we find

most often? Doubt. Grumbling. Complaining. Impatience. Hopelessness. These we discovered in ourselves instead of a strong faith. Hardships showed us our weaknesses and foolishness. They taught us to see that we dare not lose Him. They taught us to call out to Him to help us and to hold us close, because we know that we can do nothing without Him.

St. Peter says, "Do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is upon you, as though some strange thing is happening to you." St. James says that the testing of our faith works patience. We need testing. We need the storms. We need the waves. For a man does not have in himself the power to remain steadfast. Therefore we must be driven again and again by tribulations to take refuge in the Lord. Look to the examples of our fathers in the faith: we see in King David the same man who could say, "Save me, O God! For the waters have come up to my neck!" would also say, "The Lord is my Rock and my Fortress and my Deliverer; my God, my strength in whom I trust; my Shield and the Horn of my salvation." The prophet Elijah, when it seemed the whole nation was faithless and wanted him dead complains and sighs, "It is enough! Now, Lord, take my life." This same man stands heroically and alone before the 450 prophets of Baal and by God's strength overcomes them!

In the New Testament, St. Paul reveals to us the Holy Spirit's wisdom on this matter: "We must through many tribulations enter the Kingdom of God," and "tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us," and "our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us far more exceedingly with the eternal weight of glory" and "in all these things we are more than conquerors though Him who loved us."

Where did St. Paul and the thousands of cross-bearers before and after him find comfort? The same place frightened disciples on the verge of shipwreck found it when death stared them in the face: Jesus was in the ship with them. It seemed like He didn't see the storm. He was sleeping. It's as if He didn't care about the danger. But He was there. They quickly learned to see that this was enough. A Word from Him – and the waves became calm as glass.

And He is still with us. We don't see Him, even though we do see the waves. How often this is repeated! There we sit in our hardship, maybe even wallowing in self-pity. It seems all hope is gone. We don't see Him. Does He see us and our struggles? We know what it's like, dearly beloved! What do we say when storms and waves threaten us and we don't see Him? He seems so far away! Are we still steadfast, at peace, and trusting? No, we are usually in fear, discouraged, and tired. From our perspective, we see only what will make us more heavy-hearted. But He knows. His hour has not yet come. But it does come, and just when the need is greatest. We experience it today: that He is here and has not forgotten us.

So often in our pain, so often in our suffering, so often in our sickness, we do not see Him. Yet, He is there, with His love and power. And so it is with many other things: When it seems as though we must endure unfairness, He is there, for He endured false accusations and was charged to die a criminal's public death for us. When we work and toil in our hard and tiring callings in life, and it seems as though we toil in vain – He is there, for He rose from the dead; our preaching and your faith are not in vain. When we work faithfully and diligently in our relationships and human weakness becomes ever apparent and gains the upper hand, when doubt wins and courage loses, He is there, because He was betrayed and even his closest friends abandoned Him. When we find ourselves lonely and heavyhearted, doubting ourselves in

sorrow and in weakness, when everything is going backward instead of forward – He is there, because He knows the ultimate loneliness and defeat, being left by God: “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”

“So why are you afraid, O you of little faith?” Pray to Him for help. This we do because He does not want us to be unaware under the cross He has formed for us, or indifferent or blind to this world’s dangers. And as far as we pray, we should wait and believe that much farther. His eyes have not become weak. His power has not become less. His love has not become cold. Indeed, He Himself has set the time, He Himself has set the hour, and He Himself gives the means for our deliverance.

Believe Him, therefore, dearly beloved. He is with us in the boat! He, Jesus Himself, is nearer to us than He was near the disciples on the sea. He comes in bread and wine. We call His name “Immanuel” because God is with us. As Jonah saw no way of safety in tempestuous waters, yet God was there to rescue him in the belly of a fish, so also God’s Son saw no way of life through the cross, yet His death defeated death and the glories of His resurrection are now ours.

Trust the Lord from now on. Let Him be in control. He will accomplish that which He has purposed in our life. We cast our cares upon Him even though we don’t see Him. He will shelter and uphold us until we see Him face to face. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✽BJF✽