

Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta
“Grace in the Storm” (Matthew 14:22-33)
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In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In his 2000 book *In the Heart of the Sea* Nathaniel Philbrick recounts the true story of the early nineteenth century voyage of the whaleship *Essex*. The captain of the *Essex* was George Pollard, Jr., and the first mate was Owen Chase, who would later write an account of that voyage which in turn became the inspiration for Herman Melville’s epic 1851 novel *Moby Dick*. Philbrick describes a horrendous storm the *Essex* endured at sea:

They could see it coming: a large black cloud rushing toward them from the southwest...It was said that the sharper and more defined the storm cloud, the worse the wind; thunder and lightning were also bad signs. When jagged streaks of lightening began to crackle out of the forbidding black sky and thunder boomed, (Captain) Pollard finally began to issue orders. But it was too late (39).

As the crew of the *Essex* attempted to turn the ship away from the storm a massive wave hit it broadside, literally tipping it sideways for a time, until finally it turned upright again. The *Essex* weathered the storm, but not without significant loss, as Philbrick writes:

The mood aboard the *Essex* sank into one of gloom. The ship had been severely damaged. Several sails, including both the main topgallant and the studding sail, had been torn into useless tatters. The cookhouse had been destroyed. The two whaleboats that had been hung off the port side of the ship had been torn from their davits and washed away, along with all their gear. The spare boat on the stern had been crushed by the waves...Although the *Essex*’s stern could be repaired, they would be without a single spare boat (42).

Although the crew managed to repair the stern and continue their voyage, as you may know the *Essex* would later meet her demise courtesy of a giant sperm whale.

Storms at sea can also catch small boats off guard, as depicted in Judith Guest's 1976 novel *Ordinary People*, which inspired the 1980 multiple Oscar winning film of the same name. The novel centers on the Jarrett family in the aftermath of a storm on Lake Michigan that caught the two sons in the family off guard: Buck, the older and more athletic, and his younger brother Conrad. Ironically it was Conrad who survived the storm, clinging to their little boat for his life, while his stronger brother Buck slipped away and drowned.

In the aftermath of this tragedy Conrad, and his parents Calvin and Beth, each struggled in their own way. Conrad is overcome with survivor's guilt and blames himself for Buck's death. Late in the book Conrad in a panic calls his therapist Dr. Berger in the middle of the night. Dr. Berger asks Conrad to meet him at his office. Between sobs Conrad cries out, "I can't! I can't get through this! It's all hanging over my head!" Dr. Berger asks, "What's hanging over your head?" Conrad continues:

"I don't know...I need something, I want something—I want to get off the hook!" "For what?" He begins to cry again. "For killing him, don't you know that? For letting him drown!" "And how did you do that?" Berger asks..."I don't know, I just know that I did!" Head cradled on his arms again, he sobs. Cannot think, cannot think, no way out of this endless turning and twisting. Hopeless.

"You were on the opposite sides of the boat," Berger says, "so you couldn't even see each other. Right? And he was a better swimmer than you. He was stronger, he had more endurance." "Yes." "So, what is it you think you could have done to keep him from drowning?" Tears flood his eyes again. He wipes them roughly away with his hand. "I don't know. Something... You don't understand," he says. "It has to be somebody's fault. Or what was the whole point of it?" "The point of it," Berger says, "is that it happened" (223-224).

At some point in your life you have probably been caught off guard by a massive storm that turned the ship of your life sideways and left you without any spare boats, and you suffered a loss that left you feeling guilty and out of control, echoing Conrad, "I can't get through this!"

In today's gospel lesson the disciples, experienced fishermen, no strangers to the sea, were nonetheless caught off guard by a sudden storm, as Matthew wrote:

Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them (Matthew 14:22-24).

The disciples were in the boat in the first place because Jesus had commanded them to take the boat across the sea: it was not their idea; it was Jesus' idea. And still the disciples were "battered by the waves" and "far from land" with "the wind against them." Perhaps they were wondering like Conrad was, "what was the point of it?" And yet Jesus gave them grace in the storm:

And early in the morning (Jesus) came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid" (Matthew 14:25-27).

Jesus provided grace in the storm to his disciples both in his reassuring presence and equally reassuring words, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Then Jesus provided additional grace in the storm for the chief disciple, Peter:

Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God" (Matthew 14:28-33).

When Peter's attention turned from walking toward Jesus to noticing the strong wind he started sinking, and what did he do? He cried out a very succinct and powerful prayer, "Lord, save me!" And Jesus did. Then Jesus and Peter got into the boat, and "the wind ceased." Jesus gave all of them grace in the storm.

And in the hush following this awful terrifying storm the disciples were reminded yet again that the One who had met them in the very middle of that storm, the One who had reassured them with both his presence and his words—“Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid”—is the same One who always answers the prayer, “Lord, help me!”—Jesus Christ, “the Son of God.”

Later Jesus provided grace in the storm for the whole world on Good Friday, as Jesus found himself in the midst of a storm of violent hate and blasphemous mockery, battered not by the waves of the sea but by the hands of Roman soldiers, with not just the wind against him but the entire world against him. Even Peter, who Jesus had literally saved from drowning, denied even knowing him, and was nowhere to be found.

And yet Jesus still gave grace. And Matthew tells us that after Jesus breathed his last there was an earthquake and those at the foot of the cross echoed the disciples in the boat after the storm, “Truly this was the Son of God” (Matthew 27:54). And later on Easter Sunday the Risen Jesus gave grace again to his disciples, proclaiming repeatedly to them, “Peace be with you” (John 20:19, 21, and 26). And yes, the Risen Jesus also gave grace again to denying Peter, and fully forgave him and fully restored him in front of his peers, calming the storm of grief and guilt that had been raging in his heart (John 15-19).

And what was true for the disciples is true for you. When you are caught off guard by the storms in your life that turn your life sideways, cause tremendous damage, and leave you echoing Conrad, “I can’t get through this!” the same Risen Jesus walks out to you and reassures you, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

Although in the aftermath of the storms in your life you may wonder what the point of it was...remember the gospel. Remember that when it comes to the love of God demonstrated historically and definitively in Jesus’ death and resurrection, “The point of it is that it happened.” Remember that when it comes to your relationship with God you have nothing hanging over your head, you are off the hook. And finally, remember that when you echo Peter’s prayer, “Lord, save me!” you too will be given grace in the storm.

Amen.