

“Smooth and Rough Sailing”

Acts 27:1-44; Luke 8:22-25

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I. Introduction

So what is your experience of life? Is it smooth sailing? Or is it more like stormy seas? Which way would you lean?

To help us think about that a little I have a couple of paintings to look at. The first is by 19th C impressionist artist Claude Monet. It is all about light and color. It looks like late afternoon with warm hues of color. The clouds move across the sky. You see reflections in the calm water. You can imagine the gentle rocking of the boats and the waves lapping the shore. The painting invites us to experience the peace of the waterside on a beautiful afternoon. Smooth sailing.

And then there is this painting by 17th C Dutch artist Rembrandt. It is the artist's interpretation of the story from Luke 8; Christ calming the storm. Except, it's before any “calming” happens. We have seen it before in connection with this story. The painting depicts the chaos of the storm and the frailty of being human. As a wave crashes over the side of the boat the disciples are losing control. You can feel the wind and the water and fear. But in the middle of all the action is a very calm Jesus Christ. He's like “the eye in the storm.” Some of the disciples have turned to him to save them. And if you carefully count the figures in the painting you come up with 14; Jesus, the 12 disciples, and one more person, probably Rembrandt himself. And by painting himself into the story he's saying this is more than a story in the Bible. This is also a metaphor about experiences in life; fearful storms in life happen that make you wonder if you will survive.

So what is life like? Is it like Monet's painting and smooth sailing? Or is it more like Rembrandt's and filled with frightening storms? In truth the answer is both. But we each tend to lean a little more one way or the other at different times in our lives. Which way might you be leaning today?

Both the readings from the Bible are about boats and storms on the sea. Both tell of a historical happening; people were really caught in frightening storms. But perhaps more importantly the stories are symbols and metaphors for life, our lives, where and when frightening storms happen to us. And when we realize that these stories are also about us and life and faith, we ponder the stories a little more deeply.

II. Texts and Brief Exegesis

The first story in Luke is a familiar one. Jesus is with his disciples in a boat. They want to cross the Sea of Galilee, which is a very large lake. It was a very long walk around the lake; about 78 miles if you walk all the way around. So it was much faster and easier to cross by boat.

We know that at least 4 of Jesus' disciples were fishermen: Peter, Andrew, James, and John. And so they knew about the Sea of Galilee and boating. And they knew that you had to watch the weather because the Sea was shallow and a sudden storm could cause big waves and life-threatening circumstances.

And so it happens; they get caught in a storm. Rembrandt's painting is filled with the drama. Waves are breaking over the side and water is filling the boat. A fierce wind and the waves are ripping control of the boat away from the disciples' hands. Some fight on to try to regain control, while others cry out to Jesus to save them. Surprisingly Jesus is asleep when all this is going on. But importantly he is in the boat with them.

In the miracle of the story Jesus awakes and rebukes the power and chaos of the storm. The wind dies down. The waves disappear. The Sea is calm. You can see wet and exhausted disciples stunned, thankful, and perplexed. Who indeed is this who can command the storms? Only God can do that. Who is this Jesus? And what does it mean to have faith in storms?

The story is also about life and faith and Jesus. Boats in the early Christian faith were symbols of the Church. And people in the boat were early followers of Jesus. And in their experience storms threatened their lives and their church. It was not all smooth sailing. Despite their belief, Christian faith was hard at times. Belief in Jesus made you different than the pagans all around you. Harassment and persecutions happened. Families were divided. The ways of kindness, care, generosity, peace, and love are always demanding. And the Roman government at times encouraged persecutions. Christians know about storms.

But the promise in the story is that Jesus is in the boat. Jesus is present in the Church with Christians in smooth seas and storms. And we are asked to have faith as we ponder who is the one who has power to calm the storm. The words of Psalm 46:11 fit here: "Be still and know that I am God."

The story in Acts is similar as it's written by the same author. In it, Paul is a prisoner on his way to Rome. He is imprisoned for his faith in Christ and his mission work which disturbs the Pax Romana; Roman Peace. Amidst threats on his life, Paul has defended himself at the various levels of the Roman judicial system. To protect himself he has claimed his Roman citizenship. Claiming his Roman citizenship means that his case will now be heard in Rome. It's a little like presenting your case to the Supreme Court. And in every trial Paul has testified to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as God's Savior.

So in the story it is the fall season. It is not the best time to be sailing on the Mediterranean Sea. Storms can be fierce. There's a Roman centurion by the name of Julius and some soldiers with him. Their job is to take some prisoners to Rome. They secure passage on a

ship with a captain and crew that is carrying many other things beside the prisoners. Despite Paul's warning they set sail. The map shows the journey and storm.

Like Jesus in the storm, Paul is the "eye in the storm." As the storm and fear and chaos rage all around the ship, Paul is calm. He believes God has called him to testify about Jesus "to the ends of the earth," which means Rome. So Paul trusts God that things will work out and they will get to Rome. In the midst of a storm when all seems lost, Paul delivers a sermon to trust God. Later he will act to stop a mutiny. He predicts no lives will be lost if they "stick with him," because he trusts God to deliver him. And that prophecy is fulfilled when all escape when the ship becomes caught on the rocks close to land. By now Julius the Roman centurion trusts Paul.

With the storm raging all around them, in an ultimate act of confidence, Paul encourages everyone on the ship to eat. But even more than that, the story says that Paul took bread, blessed it, broke it, and ate. "Took, blessed, broke, ate" is the early Church language for communion. It is the sharing of bread around a table with faith, and with the risen Christ. Perhaps some wondered, "What good will that do in the midst of a storm?" But Paul believes, like the story in Luke, Jesus is present in the boat with them. And in sharing communion they are encouraged to experience the risen Christ, and hope. And though most were not Christians, they eat the bread around the table and experience Christ and hope as they are able. And very honestly, sometimes in storms that's us also.

As those early Christians read of Paul's journey and the storm, they believed it was more than just a story about Paul and a storm. They also believed it was metaphor and symbol for life and faith and God. Like the story in Luke, storms come up in life. Belief is no guarantee it will always be smooth sailing. Chaos happens. Hard things happen. Storms happen. But we are invited to trust the One in the boat with us, the risen Christ. And when we "take, bless, break and eat" bread at communion we are reminded in sacrament that Christ is with us. Communion is the food of confidence in the midst of a storm.

Both stories also remind us that Christian faith is lived in community. There are different people with different levels of fear and hope on the boat. In faith and in life we need each other. And that is especially true in storms. We need people to support us, to give us a call, to drop us a note, to stop by with some soup, and to pray for us when we can't pray ourselves. We need people to give us a smile, to hold a hand, and to listen when we want to talk about the storms in our lives. We need people who can gently remind us of that verse of "Amazing Grace": "Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come. 'Twas grace that brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home."

III. Brief Theological Reflections

A friend is a fisherman. He likes to fish for Walleye up on Lake Erie. And he knows Walleye are my favorite fish. So when he catches a few, he brings a few filets by. It's a great gift.

He told me that you have to pay attention to the weather on Lake Erie. The lake is shallow. So when storms come up, big waves and wind happen in a hurry. He said in his 20-foot boat he didn't want to get caught on Lake Erie in a storm.

He said one time he was up on Lake Erie fishing. Fishing wasn't good, so he wondered about a weather change. Looking up at the sky he saw dark clouds moving in quickly. They pulled up all their lines and headed full throttle to where they had launched. The wind started to blow. The waves got bigger and started to white cap. He said he kept the bow of the boat into the waves because he didn't want to get hit sideways with a wave. By now spray from the waves was coming over the bow and into the boat. The wind was picking up. Rain was coming. And they heard some thunder behind them. He said you understand what helplessness feels like when you are caught in a storm on the water. Fortunately they got to the dock and loaded the boat while they still could. Storms happen even to the most experienced and wise of fishermen.

And I think that's the thing; smooth sailing and storms are both a part of life. Even to the wisest and most faithful. At least that's my experience. And so it's good to pay attention and give thanks when the sailing is smooth. Like the Monet painting, enjoy the beauty, feel the calm, live into the peace. Because you know it can be otherwise.

And sometimes it is otherwise. Life has storms. Like the Rembrandt painting, storms can feel overwhelming, frightening, anxiety producing. You may wonder if you will survive. And even though it may not feel like it sometimes, it's important to be part of the church. It's important to realize you're in the boat with others. It's important to be reminded Christ is there also. It's important to do the things of faith, like "take, bless, break, and eat" the bread around the communion table. And it's important to care for each other in smooth sailing and storms.

And there is this old bit of wisdom: "Smooth seas do not make good sailors."