

Why Are You Afraid?

Matthew 8:23-27

²³ And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. ²⁴ A windstorm arose on the sea, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. ²⁵ And they went and woke him up, saying, “Lord, save us! We are perishing!” ²⁶ And he said to them, “Why are you afraid, you of little faith?” Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm. ²⁷ They were amazed, saying, “What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?”

Theme Statement

Matthew employs the image of a tremendous force of nature to signify the divine power working in Jesus, the power to overcome chaos. This power, paradoxically, can also be disruptive and destabilizing as it creates disciples of us.

Exploring the Word

In chapters 8 and 9 of Matthew’s gospel, Jesus’ power over chaos, demons, and sin is on display—power the Jewish scriptures attributed only to God. What it means to be a disciple of Jesus, what it will mean to submit to this power and authority, is illuminated in the focus passage.

Matthew 8:23-25 Entering the tempest

In the verses preceding the focus passage (vv. 18-22), Jesus speaks with two people who say they want to follow him, indeed that they will follow him wherever he goes. But when one of the men says he just needs a little more time so he might first bury his father, Jesus says to him, “Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.” Following Jesus takes precedence over family obligations.

The focus passage then begins with “And when he got into the boat, his disciples *followed* him” (v. 23). They followed him into a gale-force windstorm, great waves swamping their boat and threatening their very lives. Matthew demonstrates that following Jesus takes disciples to the edge of their existence.

The word translated in verse 24 as “windstorm,” *seismos*, suggests a tempest, hurricane-force winds, a staggering force of nature. While parallels of this story are found in the gospels of Mark (4:35-41) and Luke (8:22-25), only Matthew uses the word *seismos* for the storm. When used elsewhere in Matthew’s gospel, *seismos* refers to an earthquake: Jesus, teaching about the end of the age, predicts its coming with famines and earthquakes (24:7). At the very moment of Jesus’ death by crucifixion, the centurion on watch sees an earthquake split rocks, open tombs, and release the dead, compelling him to confess—in terror—that Jesus was God’s Son (27:51-54). Three days later another *seismos* occurs, signaling the descent from heaven of an angel of the Lord who rolls back the stone from Jesus’ tomb (28:2).

These all suggest that Matthew uses *seismos* specifically to convey the character of an apocalyptic event. Apocalyptic events are times when the divine reality breaks into the human sphere. These are all stories intended to leave readers both awestruck and with a feeling of dread. Each

seismos signals the presence of God acting with cataclysmic power. Matthew, more than any other gospel writer, portrays Jesus as the Messiah some first-century Jews expected and through whom they desperately hoped God would intervene in their troubled era of human history. That *seismoi* accompany Jesus fulfills their hope and expectation.

In addition, only Matthew reports the disciples' plea "Lord, save us!" The language of salvation obviously refers to deliverance from the circumstance of the storm at hand. But here Matthew also presses for something bigger. He has identified Jesus as "God-with-us" (Matthew 1:23), and it is by God's presence to them through Jesus that the disciples will be rescued from the chaos threatening both their physical and spiritual existence.

Matthew 8:26-27 Why are you afraid?

In texts from the Hebrew Bible—for example, "You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them" (Psalm 89:9) and "He made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed" (Psalm 107:29)—the sea symbolizes the power of chaos locked in battle with God. Matthew draws on images from these texts to portray Jesus' power over the stormy sea as the same divine power.

The disciples, initially terrified because they think they are perishing, are astonished when Jesus subdues the storm. Dread and fear in the presence of a great force are shown to be very closely related to awe and wonder in the presence of that same great force.

The Word Today

The last several years have offered up no small number of extreme weather and other natural events—hurricanes with enormous storm surges and catastrophic wind damage, a destructive derecho over the midwestern United

States, undersea earthquakes resulting in devastating tsunamis. The scope and scale of the storms, the magnitude of the destruction left in their wakes, and the reality of how powerless human beings are before their might and strength leave us both terrified and awestruck.

Insurance companies refer to these kinds of events as "acts of God"—events of natural cause and outside of human control. That we call them "acts of God" suggests we recognize in them a supernatural force. They are "numinous events"—that is, events experienced as having a divine quality and to which we are inclined to attribute a religious character. But these weather events are not the only source of numinous experiences. In the presence of great beauty—before a piece of art or music, a sunset or a star-filled sky—we might similarly feel the presence of something so much greater than ourselves, a mystery, something beyond our comprehension. Numinous experiences evoke in us a powerful awareness of a spiritual reality, different from what we usually know in our daily lives. They can be elevating and humbling; they can be terrifying.

This is the experience of the disciples on the sea with Jesus. The storm itself is numinous; so is Jesus' rebuke of it. It is Matthew's intention to demonstrate that Jesus has the divine power to bring calm—and this is a source of hope and confidence to us when we feel threatened by turbulent times in our lives.

But the story also tells something about what it means to follow Jesus. Following Jesus means that we put ourselves in the presence of a force that threatens our existence as we know it. It may call us to leave family and friends, to abandon important obligations, or to be homeless in some way. It may invite us to lives of poverty, rejection, or even persecution—just as it did Jesus' first disciples. These are

all tempests of a different kind, “acts of God” in a way, but also under God’s authority and power to restore calm.

Today’s study asks, “Why are you afraid?” The writer of Hebrews responds, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (10:31). Fearful, yes, but also an experience of fullness of life we would not otherwise know, under the power of a love that will not let us perish.

Questions for Discussion

Beginnings

1. Have you ever had a dangerous experience on water? Encountered large swells on a lake, or struggled to control a sailboat, capsized kayak, or canoe? Recall the experience and describe it to other participants.
2. If you say a difficult time in your life is “stormy,” what are you trying to say about it? Make a list of other weather metaphors we use to describe life circumstances.

Exploring the Word

1. Read Matthew 24:4-14; 27:45-54; 28:1-4, and reread the focus passage. Create a dictionary definition for *seismos*. Include several synonyms and antonyms and one or two sentences using it in both biblical and nonbiblical contexts.
2. What do you think the disciples meant when they asked, “What sort of man is this?” (8:27)? Matthew’s gospel is the only one that includes this question. How do you imagine that Matthew wants his community to answer the question?

3. Given the larger context of the focus passage (8:18-22), from what else—besides the threat of the storm itself—do the disciples need saving?
4. This is the second time in Matthew’s gospel that the disciples are chided by Jesus for having “little faith.” Compare the focus passage with Matthew 6:30-33. How does Jesus see “being anxious” and “being afraid” as signs of immature or inadequate faith?

The Word Today

1. Have you ever had a numinous experience as described here? Did you experience wonder or dread or both? How did it feel in your body? If fear or dread, why were you afraid? What made you feel like it was an experience of God?
2. When have the demands of your Christian faith created storms in your life? Have any of those storms been a creative force for positive change?

Closing Prayer

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (“Evening Prayer,” ELW, p. 317)

Further Study

Hebrews 10:19-39; Acts 27; Genesis 1:1-2; Psalm 74:13-14; Psalm 89:9-12

Daily Readings

M. Mark 4:35-41

T. Matthew 24:9-14

W. Romans 8:31-39

T. John 16:25-33

F. Matthew 8:18-22

S. Matthew 8:28-34

S. Matthew 8:23-27

Memorization

Matthew 8:26

He said to them, "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?"
Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and
there was a dead calm.