



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Who will the storm?

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The tenth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Matthew 14:22-33*

A weathervane atop the cupola of a roof points to where the invisible winds blow. The needle of a seismograph points to paper and scribbles out tremors of the earth that we can barely feel through our shoes. Don't forget our deep-ocean tsunami detection buoys, which marvelously tether the sea floor to the surface. They can sense currents and tremors among the murky canyons of the sea that no one would ever perceive, except, perhaps, the blind, ghostly creatures that live there. On air and land and sea, storms rage. And we have fashioned all kinds of delicate instruments to give us fair warning, so that we might batten down the hatches and take cover.

But there is another delicate instrument that can feel a storm brewing. And that's the human heart. Its chambers flutter with every storm. Not just storms of the elements, which are fearsome, but also storms of the soul. Storms of the spirit. Invisible, but there, all the same. All hearts, all souls are bound together. When one trembles, that tremor moves like a wave or a front across the terrain of the spirit. When storms rage there, it is no metaphor. The storms are often made of rage. Or of hate. Its power builds like water behind a dam, filling with nursed resentments, brooding vengeance, and spoiling bitterness. These storms are magnified by ignorance and lies, fake news, fundamentalism, and pseudoscience. And then, here's the frightening thing: if the human heart is not prepared, if it has not battened down its hatches, and taken cover, well then, the heart becomes part of the storm. And the heart moves the body so that it becomes part of the storm. This storm doesn't just pound you; it possesses you.

Do you feel the winds blowing? The tremors rumbling? Deep currents resurfacing? White nationalists with torches on the march, rallying around the statue of a general from a failed nation of enslavers, violently clashing with counter-protesters in Charlottesville, inspiring a deadly act of terror. One of the most far-reaching corporations, Google, embroiled in conflict as to whether women are full-fledged human beings, or have second-class biology as workers. Much of our corporate life, even now, still remains tragically confused and muddled on this point. Our president and the Supreme Leader of North Korea rattling sabres with their nuclear weapons, with little reflection on the holocaust of innocents that would ensue as the consequence of their bluster. It seems that the dignity and full personhood of women and people of color is still up for debate. It seems that the evil of nuclear weapons has still not been internalized by our leaders.

We have to work against our sense of surprise at all this, because there is so much work to do. Any historian will tell you that our nation's house was built on many fault lines and graveyards, more than I can suggest here. And deep conflicts and flawed principles that only seemed to be quelled in the late 20th century return to our line of sight. The ghosts of the Civil War, WW2, the Korean War, the ghosts of white supremacy and male supremacy—these are not ghosts, but living people and institutions possessed by their tenacious resentments and ideologies.

These resuscitated conflicts threaten to consume us, not just in their folly, but, more insidiously, in their antagonisms. For we have to keep repeating this: we must resist racism, and sexism, and bellicose bluster, the callous disregard for human life, the will to power. In fact, I think we need to resist these evils more than we have. The demands of our moral education never end, for us and for our children. We need to never fail at repeating how these spirits can destroy our friends, our beloved institutions, and literally entire cities.

But, despite our best intentions, our response to deep sin requires even deeper virtue. A deeper foundation. For, we can respond in a way that makes the big picture worse. We can become part of the storm; instead of stilling it, we can make it stronger. We can reflect and repeat, rather than resist and reduce. We can be possessed by the lie that our rival is to be feared, attacked, and, if need be, destroyed. We become blinded to the light of God in each other, lost in a whirlwind, mirroring all that anger and hate and recrimination, yet thinking of it as the “good” kind.

Jesus was no stranger to these human storms. They followed him everywhere he went. Swirling about him, powerful winds against him and his disciples. We meet him in our Gospel reading today after two troubling events. John the Baptizer, Jesus’ own cousin and friend, has just been gruesomely killed, his head served on a platter at Herod’s court. This was a taunting indignity of a good man. He didn’t deserve that. A kind of state terror. It would have made the heart sink and the blood boil. And around the same time, Jesus had a great crowd (a mob, perhaps) with him. There he fed them with his Words and then somehow fed these thousands with a meager bit of bread and fish. This was an overwhelming experience that led the crowds to demand that Jesus be their king. “To heck with Herod, and Caesar; Long live King Jesus of Nazareth! The New Moses!” Some impromptu new nation was yearning to be born and to destroy its leaders, with Jesus as their new Messiah.

Well, this kind of Kingship, this kind of leadership, Jesus had no interest in. He had already declined the Devil’s offer for all the kingdoms of this world. And so he and the disciples had to escape. And they do. They flee from this collective fever dream, splitting up, actually. The disciples are told to cross the Sea of Galilee on their craft, where he will meet them. Jesus stays behind, by himself. There’s an urgency to this. I think he is still hurting inside, still chilled to the core, still needing to think through and pray about the death of John. He has to be alone for a while, to bring that inner storm of his to God in prayer.

While Jesus is praying on the mountain the disciples are getting into trouble in their own external storm. All night they had rowed and strained against heavy waves and a strong wind that blew against them. They are in deep water far out on the lake and their situation is beginning to look desperate. Now their souls are churning and their faces tense as they fight through wave after wave. They don’t have time to think about anything beyond their own survival.

At four in the morning, when things seem bleakest, just as the dawn begins to break, Jesus comes walking toward them on the sea. Jesus has resolved his conflict. He has embraced the peace that passes all understanding, God has answered his prayers and Jesus walks above the waves. He does not sink into the roiling waters.

In all ancient writing, turbulent water, the deep, the flood, symbolize human chaos. They represent those things we most fear. What happens when things get out of control and all hell breaks loose? What happens when we can't get along and we seem swept up in our own fury, where our only desire is to frustrate each other, even if it threatens destruction on all? This is the deep, this is the human storm; this is the situation humanity finds itself in.

We are in the midst of a huge storm and we are far out at sea. Wave after wave assaults us, but these waves are of our own making. The waves are generated by our desires. They swirl and foam as we longingly look to avenge past wrongs or look at what the person next to us has and want it for ourselves, thinking it will calm us. It won't.

What saved the disciples from that storm was Jesus' presence. The presence of the one who gave up a crown. The one who spurned vengeance for his cousin's murder. The one who convinced the bloodthirsty mob to drop their stones and let the accused go free. The one who told Peter to lay down his sword when he took up arms for Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. The one who saw God working in the Romans. The one who forgave his executioners while being executed.

The one who told his disciples in that deadly storm to be not afraid. The one who saved Peter as he cried out for mercy, nearly consumed by the stormy waves, and chided him for not having enough faith and trust.

Jesus is the one who stills the storm. But, like the disciples, it seems we have our part to play, too. He calls out to us, like a friendly ghost, "Be not afraid." He lifts us up, out of the tumult, yearning for us to have even more faith, even more trust in Him.

Can we somehow learn not to be led by our fears, and rather be led by God who comes to us upon the stormy deep? I won't pretend that there is a simple solution to these trials we all face, both personal and national. It is simple to say that we should turn to Jesus and keep our eyes fixed there. The problem is that this 'simple' solution is difficult minute by minute, second by second, generation by generation. We hear the news, our hearts are enflamed by hate, violence, and killing, and we get swept up by the chaotic waves of the water and sink back into our fears, resentments, and suspicions. And we risk pulling others down with us.

I think that it is no small thing to realize that we need help, we need the strength that comes in trusting the One who is never caught up in the storms. It is no small thing to know that the one who calms waters is calming waters that we stirred up. And part of that calming comes with our own fear being made still, and our own patient trust that God will continue God's steady indomitable work in the world. Without fear, and with deep trust, we can bear persistent witness to a way of life that, without malice or mirrored hate, firmly renounces bigotry and war, and the needless killing that follows.

May the communion that we receive today drive out our fears and burrow down inside us to give us evermore trust in God. And through that divine encounter, that friendly possession, Christ may still more than a storm in

Galilee, but also the storms of the soul that rage through every human heart.