

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Two years ago, in the summer of 2016, Helen and I took a trip to the Philippines to see our son James' Peace Corps sites and to meet his host family and fellow teachers. Since the Philippines is a tropical paradise, we also took some time toward the end of our trip to go snorkeling. The first place we went to do this was a place called Moalboal, where you can swim with millions of sardines. Especially impressive was snorkeling at the surface when scuba divers were down below you. The sardines would form this huge vortex and circle around you. It was like being in the middle of a sardine tornado. That was also the first place we swam with giant sea turtles. The second place we went was further south, a place called Apo Island. The remarkable thing about this place is that it contains, in this one spot, about 90% of all the species of coral found in the Philippines. It was one of the first marine sanctuaries established in the Philippines.

Apo Island is a tiny little island, less than ½ mile in diameter, which sits about five miles off one of the larger central islands of the Philippines. To get to get there, we had to get up early from our hotel, take a ½ hour ride in the back of a truck with our snorkeling gear, and then get on a boat for another 45 minutes. Now the boat we took was a double-outrigger boat. The main hull was probably 60 feet long by 12 feet wide. We were in a group of about 20 people. Six or eight of them were scuba divers, including James, and the rest of us were snorkelers. And we had the best day of snorkeling of our whole trip. The corals were amazing, we saw all kinds of colorful tropical fish, and once again we got to swim with giant sea turtles. It was the perfect day. Except for the ending. About midday the sky went overcast, which was actually kind of nice, because it gave us some relief from the tropical sun. But as we started to head back it began to rain. And then the wind picked up. And then the sea got rough. Soon the waves were bigger than the boat. I'm talking 8, 10, 12, swells. Those of us who were out on the exposed front of the boat moved back under the tarps and around the central cockpit. There was only room for a few of the passengers to go inside. Our destination was due north, but the winds were out of the southeast. And the safest thing to do in situations like this is to head into the wind so that you're cutting across the waves instead of having them come at you from the sides. And so for quite a while we actually had to head away from our destination. I will admit that I was alarmed, even frightened. And you can ask Helen yourself how she felt about it. I was fairly confident that crew knew what they were doing and that the boat was solid and stable enough to weather the storm. Those outriggers are there for a reason. But the longer it went on, the less confident I became. After a while, even the crew, who had been all smiles and laughter at the beginning of the storm, had started to show signs of concern. I prayed. I held on. But there wasn't much more I could do. It did cross my mind, though, that If we survived this ordeal I would have a real-life sermon illustration for this story of Jesus and his disciples in their boat during a storm. Eventually the storm passed and we made it back to the big island where our hotel was. It was much later than we had planned, but we were happy to be back on dry land.

So, yes, now I think I have a better idea of just how the disciples felt in our Gospel reading today. What I want us to think about in the next few minutes, though, is Jesus' response to their fear. A fear I understand, and I think you do to. And yet Jesus does not seem at all sympathetic. Instead, he almost scolds them. "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

Not all of us will face bad weather on the open sea. But all of us will face storms in our life, real and metaphorical. We will be faced with situations in which we are not in control,

situations that threaten our health, our financial or emotional stability, and even our life. This Gospel reading today shows us two ways in which storms affect us, and one way that Jesus would have us respond to the storms in our lives.

First, storms give us perspective. When things go well for us we can begin to imagine that that is how life ought to be. We might even imagine that we deserve for things to go well for us. And there is no shortage of advertisers who are happy to reinforce our sense of entitlement. The storms of life shatter that illusion. They reveal our limits, and show us that we are not ultimately in control of things. We lose a job or a relationship. Our health suddenly fails us. A loved one dies unexpectedly. For the disciples, this realization came quickly, miles from shore in a boat that was quickly filling with water.

Second, storms make us afraid, and fear turns us inward. When we are afraid for our own safety and security we tend to disregard others and focus only on our immediate needs. And some of our leaders have learned to take advantage of our fear. They gain power by appealing to our baser instincts, and they maintain their control and their advantages by stoking our fears of those who are different from us. They even manufacture crises to keep us afraid of each other and turned in on ourselves. The disciples feared for their lives as their boat took on water. All they cared about in that moment was their own survival. "Do you not care that we are perishing?" was all they could think to say to Jesus as they woke him from sleep. We understand their fear and their desperation all too well.

Third, understandable or not, Jesus does not want the disciples or us to give in to our fear in the midst of life's storms. Jesus wants us to recognize in those moments when things are beyond our control that it is God who ultimately has power over all the storms of our lives, and that God is with us in the midst of those storms. That does not mean that God will immediately silence all of our troubles when we cry to God for help, the way Jesus stilled the storm for the disciples. Jesus himself prayed to the Father to "take his cup away" in the Garden of Gethsemane, to prevent him from being crucified. But that did not happen. I think that Jesus' reaction to the disciples' fear was along the same lines as Paul's words to the Romans (ch. 14): faith and trust in God above every thing else means being confident that "whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's."

What would our lives look like if, in the midst of the storms we face we could have the faith that Jesus found missing in his disciples on that boat? What if we truly believed the promises made to us in Holy Baptism, that we now belong to Christ, and that nothing in all creation can separate us from God's love? What if we could wholeheartedly proclaim with Paul that whether we live or whether we die, whether we are sick or whether we are healthy, whether we are rich or whether we are poor, we are the Lord's? What kind of life could we live, what kind of people could we be, if fear did not control our actions? If no one could cynically manipulate us by making us fear one another? Would not our hearts be turned outward, opened to others facing their own storms? Would we not be compelled to become conduits of God's presence, God's love, and God's peace in the midst of those storms? I think we would. Of course we would! And there are plenty of people who are in the midst of their own storms these days. If they are not among your personal acquaintances, all you need to do is open a newspaper or turn on your computer. Storms abound! But God's love for the world abounds in even greater measure. May God grant us faith to trust that promise, and open hearts to live out our faith in love. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.