

SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
Lake Worth, Florida

Eve of Pentecost XIII, Proper 14A (August 9, 2008)

Canon Richard T. Nolan

**“CHRISTIAN UNFLAPPABILITY”**

*Storms Everywhere*

In recent years we have been watching numerous scientific documentaries on TV. It has been a bit unsettling to learn of the turbulence, even violence, in the evolutionary process. Our own planet has been, and could again become, a target of various external batterings. Moreover, within our globe there is constant turmoil resulting from interconnected volcanoes, earthquakes, and extreme weather conditions. Although there are remarkable exceptions, the “law of the jungle” is inherent among creatures, some more than others. At the quantum level, the laws of nature as we perceive them make room for chaos and the bizarre.

To be sure, existing side by side with all of this storminess are startling occasions of tranquility and cooperative behavior. In fact, one proposal asserts that nature’s observable disorderliness and upheavals are really forces governed by an overarching drive toward cooperation and balance. One *can* interpret tigers attacking and eating zebras as cooperative, although the zebras certainly do not experience their violent deaths as overall positive events!

The primary answer to why things are as they seem to be is summed up in the 38th chapter of the Book of Job, where God is portrayed as admonishing Job for his demand for a satisfactory explanation of why he, a faithful, innocent individual, is suffering. God begins a somewhat caustic reprimand by saying, “Where were *you* when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if *you* have understanding.” In other words, God knows “the *what* and the *why*” God is doing; we mortals do not “have understanding,” so we are to live faithfully with our unanswered questions!

Apart from the external natural order, we know well that internally, we human beings create horrific storms for others and ourselves. Sometimes we are trapped in tempests not of our own making. Much of this falls within the category of “stress.” Various surveys show that many American individuals describe themselves as extremely stressed, even fearful. Many people do things that are plainly not good for them; they smoke, drink, and eat junk food, all to excess. They feel fatigued and get headaches; work and money were listed as principal worries. Their stress and apprehensions have a negative impact on both their personal and professional lives. For example, they fight with people close to them. In a particular survey one in four people reported that they have been alienated from a friend or family member because of stress, with 8 percent connecting stress to divorce or separation. Not coping well at all, they are too often in a flap about life in general or over particular issues.

*An Account of Stress, Fear, and Faith*

In the Bible, the sea is often represented as the habitat of demonic forces hostile to God. Whether allegory or event, the eloquent account of human distress on the sea in tonight’s Gospel is very familiar. At the time of its writing, the followers of Christ once led by Matthew are weathering a storm of persecution and martyrdom. These Christians were neither in rebellion nor behaving badly, but were faithfully serving God.

This storm story addresses issues of stress, fear, and faith. It holds a promise that, poetically speaking, Jesus comes to Christians in the midst of a storm -- that the storm does not hold the upper hand -- that Christ is present with his disciples to rescue them, at least in an interior or ultimate sense.

Enriching the account is Peter, an impulsive leader who genuinely wished to obey Jesus, but who took his eyes off Christ as he saw the storm; consequently Peter was overcome with stress and fear. Yet dependable Jesus caught him and rebuked all of them for having little (or, only “partial”) faith. For Peter, this is a moment of both weakness and strength. He doubts, but wants to believe. He fears, but steps out of a perfectly safe boat into the storm. He begins to walk, but finds himself distracted by the fierce wind. When he begins to sink, he calls out, "Lord, save me!" - expressing faith even through his fear.

This passage brought great comfort to the early Christians. While not spared suffering and death, they were confident that Jesus, the Son-of-God Messiah, would somehow save them - even if saved, they were to die.

### *Contemporary Significance of the Story*

In its larger context, this passage is the account of Matthew's church, fearful and confused, looking for something to grasp in the midst of its suffering. In its largest context, this is a story of every Christian as we move back and forth between doubt and faith; sometimes we focus narrowly on our own storms and their resulting fears and apprehensions; during those times we are often only partially focused on Jesus; we, too, have "little faith." In any case, what does it mean in ordinary language for us to be "focused on Jesus"?

As Christians, we believe that Jesus (as God's "Word") embodies and exemplifies the Creator's purposes and intentions for humanity. As one New Testament theologian has commented, "For all human beings, Jesus is the God-given clue to the meaning of human life." When we want to know "what's it all about," we look to Jesus the Christ.

This is to say we hold dearest to our hearts and minds that by our baptism as unique children of God, each of us is (akin to Jesus) a "son" or "daughter" of God. We define ourselves most fundamentally in good times as well as during turbulence by this chosen relationship to God. Holding faithfully to this hallowed identity, we are saved by this bond from personal, interior defeat. Instead, our lives are given stability both by this conviction and by our common vocation to grow increasingly to revere God profoundly and to love our neighbors as ourselves deeply. An example comes to us in a recent statement by Bishop Gene Robinson, "The reason I can be calm in the middle of this particular storm is because I know how it is all going to turn out. It is going to end with the full inclusion of all God's people in God's Church. I don't know when; it doesn't matter when. But that is where we are headed and we must work hard to bring that Church about." The Bishop is thoroughly grounded in his baptismal identity and vocation, one which you and I are invited to share.

When our hearts and minds are violated to the core, when you and I feel ourselves in a flap "going down the tubes" of apprehension and despair, or even when we erroneously elevate wonderful occasions to God-like status, we have lost trust in our baptismal identity. Instead, as half-believers, as individuals of "little faith," we substitute aspects of our lives for *who we are*. Most individuals frequently define themselves inadequately, even perilously or extravagantly, by their personal qualities or activities. The majority erratically bounce among several identities. Most basically, they assert, I *am* - my job, my religious tradition, my ethnic heritage, my sexual orientation; I *am* a rescuer, a parent, a child, a spouse or partner; I *am* - my gender, my education, my busyness, my leisure activities, my possessions, my physical appearance; I *am* - according to the situation of the moment.

While none of these qualities or activities are inherently evil, they are unable to sustain us completely or to restore us to a life that is truly fulfilled, secure, confident, unafraid, anchored, and contented. Only as a "child of God," ever growing in our faith in Christ's Good News, can that happen. Only then can we feel free from incapacitating fears; only then can we be saved by sufficient inward coping power; only then can we come to Christian unflappability.

---

### Matthew 14:22-33

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. And early in the morning he 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."

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."

---

*Oxford Bible Commentary*

**Matthew 14:22–36**

This passage, which is rich in both its Christological implications and its instruction on discipleship, is an epiphany which brings rescue. Jesus orders the disciples to cross without him—a circumstance which may be intended to teach that if obedience to Christ puts one in dire need then Christ himself will offer help. Jesus, illustrating 6:6, then goes by himself up a mountain to pray (cf. the circumstance that Moses prayed alone on Sinai, e.g. Ex 32:30–4). But when the disciples suffer distress during the last watch of night, Jesus walks on the sea towards them and, to calm a terror born not only from the wind but also from fear of a ghost, commands them not to be afraid. By walking on the sea, Jesus, like the omnipotent creator of the OT, overcomes the powers of chaos (cf. Job 9:8), and by crossing the sea so that his disciples may in turn cross safely he is again like YHWH, who prepared the way for the Israelites to pass through the Red Sea (Ps 77:19). Clearly the powers of the deity are incarnate in God's Son, who can here borrow the theophanic 'I am' (*egō eimi*, v. 27; cf. Ex 3:14). (Cf. further fgs j.)

vv. 28–31 constitute a story within a story. Peter rightly wishes to imitate his Lord, who can share his authority and power with his followers. But Peter begins to sink because of his little faith (cf. 6:30; 8:26) and so must cry for help (cf. Ps 69:1–3). Jesus, however, is there to answer his call despite inadequate faith. What counts is not strength of will or courage but Jesus' saving presence.