

I've got a challenge. The gospel lesson suggested this week is the story of Jesus' calming the storm... a miracle story if ever there was one... Wind and waves, boat about to sink, Jesus commands there to be calm and the wind and waves "obey him." Well, the reason I've got a challenge... is not just how to "explain" what happens in a miracle... "*how* did Jesus do it?!"... (that's impossible). But in my preaching class at seminary, Earl Woodard preached on this passage and knocked my socks off with a rousing sermon. I asked him one day how he got to be such a good preacher, and he informed me that he had been preaching since his teenage years and was known by his community as a probable preacher since his childhood, even since his birth.

As I've shared at other times, I've often been impressed by our black Christian preachers like Earl, and indeed the preaching award for my class went to another black student. They seem to have such a strong faith and the sermons are filled with so much energy and passion, sometimes very dramatic passion! And part of what impresses me is that I know - in one form or another they have usually experienced some form of oppression and prejudice in their lives, some obstacles to overcome, so the preaching and singing of themes like "We Shall Overcome" is very heartfelt!

I still recall the fervor and passion that Earl Woodard put into that sermon in our class presentations... He gave so many examples of the "storms of life," surely with stories from black communities... (In comparison, my life in the suburbs was quite sheltered!) I've thought to myself over the years, "There's no way I can preach like that!" So many examples of struggle or oppression, and black preachers seem to be able to go on for almost an hour telling about more and more "storms of life" ... everything from personal troubles, to systemic oppression, before ending up with repetitive chants of victory! It's like a dramatic symphony... there are slow and sad

sections of the sermon, but all is moving toward some kind of triumphal ending that points to the Savior who walks with us.

I am not going to attempt that kind of sermon! I don't know as many stories of storms, nor do I want to extend sermon time to 45 minutes, nor do I think you want to hear an endless list of personal woes and societal or systemic sins! So I do what I can; we all have our differing gifts. Sermons often were categorized as 3 points and a poem, or in my case it might be 3 points and a song! So before I move to a poetic song about facing "storms of life," I'll share a wee bit about Jesus' *actual* situation and how I identify with it.

As you may know, I grew up spending every summer on a river that leads out to Ipswich Bay. So I have been around boats my whole life. And as with most things in life, teenagers push the limits of safety and sensibility. But my parents were of course the voices of caution and respect for the ocean. One day my brother and I stayed out at a nearby beach until dusk in our little rowboat, too long for my parents... and apparently they called the Coastguard!... but then had to call them off when they saw us rowing back to shore in darkness. We caught hell of course, and probably were banned from rowing to the beach for a long time!

Another day, I stayed out fishing with a friend too long. we did see a storm coming; the waves were getting higher and higher! The little 16 foot motorboat was relatively small to be out in "small craft warnings," seas of about 3-4 feet. Well, the steering cable rusted out, and we were helplessly being pushed by big waves into a rock jetty .. so close to the rocks that my only choice was to steer the boat, stern first into the waves, hugging the motor with both arms to steer it. I had one of those disciples' experiences of seeing water coming steadily into the boat, over the short stern, thinking the boat could sink at any moment!... Well, I got *just far enough away from the rocks* to reset the anchor, start bailing, and then tie knots in the steering cable, to get *partial* steering back, to be able to head for home.

I could go on and on about perilous times at sea!” Oh well, just one more...One day, in my adult years, I was out in the boat with a friend fishing... yes, still only a 16 footer, with a fairly low bow. And, yes, a storm was coming in and the waves getting taller. The waves got to about 5-6 feet, small craft warnings for sure, and finally I said, “we better head for shore.” Well, I had miscalculated the wind and the waves slightly; they were bigger and stronger than I thought. Rain started coming down, and we were not making much progress toward shore. The wind and waves were coming directly against us in our direction toward shore, water kept coming over the low bow of the boat, and the engine was not strong enough to give more speed up to the crest of a wave. I had no other choice, but to act more like a sailboat and tack at a new angle, head for shore much further out, and then work our way very slowly down the shoreline toward calmer waters in the harbor.

Usually in preaching I try to get into the metaphors, like tell of many kinds of “storms of life,” as my preacher friend Earl did that day. But the literal sense of holy scripture can also resonate with us, as in *actual weather storms* we face in life. I love the literal truth of the saying “Calm seas do not a skilled sailor make!” (So true. A boat is not meant to stay in the harbor on a mooring, and sailors need some heavy winds to really learn about tacking and keeling over, and how far to go safely.) I’m glad that as a teenager I tested the waters, tested the limits, and found out how far I could push a small boat before it felt truly risky. I gained a lot of skill in riding large waves, experimenting with different angles and speeds. My poor Dad... When we approached areas of churning currents and big waves, my mother would say, “Let Ross take the wheel, I always feel safe when he is driving.” With my Mom, it was like the airplane story about the little boy who was calm in a storm... and when asked if he was afraid, the boy tells a scared neighbor, No, my father is the pilot, and he’s faced this kind of weather many times before!

With the Bible, there is always the literal level and the spiritual level. At the literal level of the actual story... Yes, Jesus is sleeping in the back the boat and something in could have known that the wind and the waves would diminish soon... and that he also had power to calm the storm, to make it happen. Yes, special power that we do not have and can't even imagine. But at the personal, psychological, metaphorical level, what did he do in the face of a storm? Jesus did not respond out of fear. Jesus stayed relaxed and calm himself. At a very human level, I have done that many times on the ocean, stay as calm and focused as possible, focusing on the immediate situation or wave ahead, with best angle and speed to cause the minimal water intake, while still making forward motion. As our black friends say, "Keep your eye on the prize." As the poet Rudyard Kipling once wrote... "If you can keep your head, when all around you are losing theirs." In other words, Don't give in to panic (many mistakes are made when operating out of fear and panic.) We need to stay calm and focus on the immediate actions needed. We can also of course add prayer, praying to the One whose Spirit is able to calm the storms.

So now I'll close with one way I stay focused and increase my faith... We can keep a song, a conviction in our hearts... that there is a God, there is a Risen Christ, there is a Power that can calm our fears and anxieties as we face some strong winds and waves. Amen.

Song: You'll Never Walk Alone...