

Sermon: Out of the Whirlwind

New North Church

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Based on **Job 38:1-11; Mark 4:35-41**

Anyone ever hear of the Gloucester Fisherman's Memorial?

It was built to celebrate the city's 300th anniversary and to honor the lives of the many fishermen who were lost at sea. The memorial was erected in 1925 so it's almost 100 years old now. If you've never seen it, it's pretty cool. The statue itself is an eight-foot-tall fisherman at the wheel, eyes fixed on the horizon, standing on a tilted deck. Inside the granite base is a time capsule containing 47 items representing Gloucester history and culture in 1923.

Thousands of lives have been lost at sea out of Gloucester. Between 1860 and 1906, 660 ships were lost. On February 24, 1862, a storm took 15 schooners and 120 men. In 1879, 249 men died in one day, more lives lost than there are active fishermen in Gloucester today.¹

The base of the memorial is inscribed with a portion of verse 23 from Psalm 107 to honor those lost. In the KJV translation, it reads, 'They that go down to the sea in ships.'

The psalm goes on to say that 'these see the works of the LORD, and his wonders in the deep.' The fishermen know that it is God who raises up the stormy wind and lifts the waves of the sea, and their faith is such that they go out anyway, knowing that they can cry out to the LORD in their trouble, if any. They know that God will bring them out of their distress and make the storm be still.

On August 5, 2001, the Gloucester Fishermen's *Wives* Association dedicated a monument to honor the women who are now and have always been the soul of fishing communities. At the dedication ceremony Angela Sanfilippo, the Association's president, said:

"The memorial serves as a testimonial to what wives, mothers, sisters, and children of fishermen of the world have endured because their men chose to be on the water. They had no choice but to stand on rock, to be on land."

The memorial honors the faith, diligence, and fortitude of the wives of fishermen everywhere and it also honors all women for their unselfish contributions to the well-being of their families and their communities.² You couldn't do that job, or be married to someone who does that job, without having faith that God is in control and has your back.

One of my favorite words from the Bible is *whirlwind*, and it comes from the first verse of today's first reading, so naturally I used it in the sermon title.

The book as a whole explores the meaning of suffering, specifically the suffering of the innocent. Up to the point where we picked up the story, Job has been very vocal about wanting to meet God face to face. He's suffering and he's innocent and he wants to know why this is happening to him, and only God can tell him.

To that end, he went so far as to file a lawsuit against God in hopes of getting an answer; he figured God would be compelled to appear in court and testify to explain the situation. In an earlier speech, he said:

“Though I am innocent, I cannot answer him;
I must appeal for mercy to my accuser.
If I summoned him to court and he answered,
I do not believe he would hear my voice.
He would crush me *with a whirlwind*
and increase my wounds without cause. (9:16-17)

Job seeks coherency. He wants to find a vantage point, a perspective, where God, the world, and his own (tragic, unfair) experience will make sense.³

Be careful what you wish for, Job.

Out of the whirlwind, he learns that the world is constructed according to God's design. See Genesis, chapter one, for more on that.

He also learns that what Bible scholar Norman Habel calls the 'chaos waters of the sea' are hedged in by limits, limits which protect the dry land.⁴ God has set it up so that things can only go so far.

Which brings us to the Gospel story. It picks up where we left off last week, when Jesus told the parable of the mustard seed and after which, Mark told us that Jesus *always* spoke in parables but that he explained everything in private to his disciples.

Then in the evening, Jesus decided to cross the Sea of Galilee, which is really a big lake. He left the crowd behind and took only the disciples with him.

As often happens out on the lake, a great windstorm arose from where we don't know. But if we bear Psalm 107 in mind, we can only think that God commanded it. The 'why' of it may make itself apparent but, in the story, had the disciples been aware of Psalm 107, it would have been obvious that God would bring them out of their distress and make the storm be still.

Instead, they were miserably afraid, the lessons of the previous day apparently forgotten.

Maybe this was a test, because there was Jesus, asleep in the stern, trusting in God and leading by example.

The last line in the psalm reads:

Let those who are wise give heed to these things,
and consider the steadfast love of the LORD. (107:43)

It's possible that Mark alluded to Psalm 107 so strongly because he wanted to focus Israel's hope for the future on Jesus, the Son of God (Mark 1:1) and the promised Messiah.

Maybe this passage is really about Mark's interpretation of the psalm. Maybe God commanded the storm in order to show that only God could make the sea and the wind obey; that only God could restore calm; and that Jesus and God were one. Those who are saved, therefore, are those who have encountered God (in the psalm) and Jesus (in the Gospel).

Also, God wouldn't let the boat sink, not with Jesus on board.

Now, we wanted to loop in John the Baptizer with today's readings, but it would have been a stretch, so, the next best thing to discuss is freemasonry.

As you may know, Freemasonry or simply Masonry refers to fraternal organizations that trace their origins to stonemason guilds in England, I believe, from about the end of the 14th century, more or less.⁵

These guilds regulated the qualifications of stonemasons, which makes sense when you want your new cathedral to last a few thousand years.

According to the Grand Lodge of Ohio, freemasonry today unites 'men of good character who share a belief in the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of mankind,' though they might be of different religious, ethnic, or social backgrounds.⁶

And yet, Freemasons have historically been persecuted by both the Catholic Church and by Protestants, and by authoritarian states such as the Nazis on the right and the Communists on the left.⁷

Here's the connection we were looking for: the Grand Lodge of England was founded on *Saint John's Day*, 24 June 1717, when four existing London Lodges met *for a joint dinner*. Ever notice how it's always the best organizations that seem to revolve around feeding people?

The Bible portrays the sea as a chaotic place. The power of God can both stir up the waves and calm them, in response to prayer. The delay before Jesus reacts reflects those places in Scripture where God seems to be absent. The disciples' fear and lack of faith shows that they may be close to Jesus, but they need to go deeper into the meaning of God's kingdom.

Later Christian interpreters of Mark's Gospel used the boat as a symbol of the church in which the redeemed passengers are delivered from divine judgement. In the third century, a theologian named Origen said, "as many as are in the bark of the holy church will voyage with the Lord across this wave-tossed life" (*On Matthew*, Homily 6). The central section of a cathedral is called the *nave*, which is Latin for 'ship.'

Sometimes, though, a boat in Mark's Gospel is just a boat.

Every now and then, the disciples have to *get out of the boat* in order to follow Jesus, as do we. Faith for them will come only in the light of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. In today's reading, the disciples' miserable, awesome fear is as ambiguous as their faith.

Fear can be the opposite of faith, as Mark says in chapter 5, but it can also mean the awe we feel when we are in the presence of the holy, that reverential 'fear of the Lord.' It may be that fear really is the beginning of wisdom, and it comes to us when we encounter God, who will not let us perish in a sea of troubles and who will bring us to our desired haven in peace.

Amen.

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¹ <https://addisonchoate.com/blog/gloucester-fishermens-memorial-history-details/>

² https://gfwa.org/?page_id=51

³ Newsom, Carol, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 177.

⁴ Habel, Norman, *The Book of Job: A Commentary* (Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1985), 530.

⁵ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freemasonry>

⁶ <https://www.freemason.com/what-is-freemasonry/>

⁷ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freemasonry#History>