

## **DANGER IN THE WATER**

**Sermon Preached by the Dr. Rev. Lindley G. DeGarmo  
Union Church of Pocantico Hills  
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Psalm 9:9-20

Mark 4:35-41

There is danger in the water. That's the point of this text for today, and on at least one level, we understand that point well.

Oh, sure, there's also beauty in water. There's an appeal to the water. There's something about the water that beckons us—especially at this time of year.

We make our plans to go to the beach, where we frolic in the surf, or lay our towels at its edge and work on our tans, or wade, at sunrise or sunset, in the foaming, salty water that laps the shore and tickles our ankles. Or we head for that mountain getaway, where there's a canoe in which we can paddle around in a cool, green lake, and ponder the stillness that is there; or where we can go fly-fishing in a swift stream, where water rushes over rocks and cascades down steep inclines. That's the beauty in the water! We love looking at it. Even the domesticated water of a swimming pool has its appeal—shimmering blue and crystal clear, set off by potted plants and patio chairs. Almost any kind of water will do. Think about that water that comes in a gentle summer rain! What more pleasant experience is there than being in the mountains, and sitting in a rocking chair on a screened porch, wearing a flannel shirt, perhaps, if it's cool, watching and smelling and listening to those big, honest drops of water falling out of the sky to nourish the earth! There's beauty in that water that freshens our tired spirits, and answers that ancient longing we have for it, and touches some primal need deep within us.

But, for all of its beauty, we know enough about the water to have a fear of it all the same. For there's danger in the water too. That's why we build fences around our pools and put life jackets in our boats and fortify our children with swimming lessons. That's why our hearts ache when we read stories about kids drowning over holiday weekends. There's something dangerous about the water that we ought to fear.

So we are sure that we understand the fear of those disciples when we hear, once again, this familiar story about them being in the boat with Jesus. Fear, after all is the key element in this story. These disciples became afraid of the storm that came across the sea from familiar territory toward unfamiliar territory, because they knew something about the danger in that water. It's the danger of what can happen in a storm—the danger of capsizing, of being overwhelmed by the wind and the waves, of drowning in the storm. We know the story backwards and forwards, we tell ourselves, so we are sure that's the danger in the water that they fear.

And because this is a Bible story and you are listening to me preach, you know how to spiritualize this danger in the water—how to turn this danger into a metaphor that will preach because you have heard preachers do it a hundred times. So off we go, applying this story to all the things about life that we fear. We look at this fear of those disciples in this story, and we relate that fear to the fear we have of the storms that

surround us. The storms of life, the storms that beset the church. Storms like the decline in our influence, or like the controversies we Christians are embroiled in or like the swirling tornadic events of history, or like the personal storms we live through and batten our hatches against. And we deal with that fear of those storms by recalling the words of Jesus from this text. “Have you still no faith?” We take that rebuke of Jesus, and off we go fussing at ourselves and each other for having such little faith in spite of the fact that Jesus Christ is also on board with us, and wakes up in time to always calm the storm.

Since we think we know this story so well, we tell ourselves that if we had enough faith, we could overcome this fear of the danger in the water. After all, in our culture, fear is something we’re supposed to overcome. Fear is something we get professional help with. There are people out there who can help us with the fear of flying, the fear of elevators, the fear of heights, the fear of crowds, the fear of the water. We should just overcome this fear, we tell ourselves, and we can do that by just having more faith! Because when Jesus Christ is on board the boat with us, there might be wind and waves and spray in the face but there is no danger in the water.

So it goes with our most popular interpretation of this text. So sure of what it’s saying to us, we go tramping around in it until it is thoroughly sanitized of its terror.

But in examining this text a little closer, I’ve decided that the terror is supposed to be there. I’ve decided that to approach this text in the way that it is usually approached is to be afraid of the wrong thing. It’s not the storm that blows up on the open sea that causes those disciples and us to fear. Because the storm, after all, isn’t the real danger in the water. Do you know what the real danger is? The real danger in the water is Jesus Christ himself!

Look what happens in this text: He travels with those disciples out to sea, a storm blows up, he wakes up and takes care of the storm, and it is only then that they get terrified! They’re not half as afraid of the storm as they are of his power to calm it. It’s His power that they’re afraid of. That’s the real danger in the water.

“Who is this,” they say, “that even the wind and the sea obey him?” They sense that there’s something about this power that is dangerous. If Jesus can do what he did with that storm, then what might he have in mind to do with them? It’s an important question, and people ask that question all the time; and we need to pay closer attention to that question. “Who is this man, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

Sometimes we observe those in our world who, when given the opportunity to embrace the faith, turn it down. And we fuss at them for not having enough faith, for not believing enough in God’s power. “If only you had enough faith, if only you weren’t so afraid...” we say. But maybe it’s just the opposite. Maybe their reluctance, at least now and then, is based not so much on how little they acknowledge the power of God as on how much they acknowledge the power of God. Maybe it’s an overwhelming sense of awe that if I get into this, I’m not sure that I can get out! Maybe it’s fundamentally a respect for, and an understanding of, the utter power of God that makes them so reluctant.

And why wouldn’t it? For it’s the kind of power, after all, that can turn not just a storm inside out, but also can turn you and me inside out. And who wants to be turned

inside out? This is the kind of power that makes people tremble down to their toes, however seaworthy the boat they're in.

“Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” That's an important question to ask!

And maybe we're just not “getting it” when we preach and behave as if one of the side-effects of faith is some sort of inoculation against a healthy fear of that power. You and I encounter people all the time who speak of their faith in God with such assurance, who allude to such a cozy relationship with God. They walk with God, they talk with God. God seems so intimately involved with them—gives them advice on where to buy a house, whom to marry, what turn to take at this or that intersection, where to go to graduate school, what babysitter to use. To hear them talk, it's as if they've walked all around God taking pictures! And there, in that relationship with God, to hear them talk about it, is every dimension of intimacy imaginable—except distance.

But there's something about the power of God that calls for distance. And it's not a lack of faith, but rather a sign of faith, when you recognize it. Those disciples knew that, somehow, as they pondered this presence with them in their boat. And so appropriately, they were afraid. Because more often than not, it's a frightening thing to be on the scene when God is present, too. And what kind of person would you be, anyway, if you had overcome the fear of God?

Fred Craddock tells a story about a pastor he knew who went to visit one of his parishioners in the hospital. The woman was suffering from a terminal disease, and the pastor went to visit her knowing that, at the end of that visit, he would pray one of those prayers that acknowledges the desperation of that situation, and that accepts, as fact, that not much is going to change. I know about prayers like that, I've prayed prayers like that dozens of times in hospital rooms. They are honest and pastorally sensitive, and often they are the only appropriate kinds of prayers to pray. They go something like this. “Oh God, we thank you that you are with us as a companion in every circumstance; even in this circumstance. And we ask you, if you choose not to change things, then to change us—to give us the courage to accept your will for our future, whatever that will is, and to place ourselves, with trust, in all-knowing hands.”

The pastor went there prepared to pray that kind of prayer, as Craddock tells the story. But the woman prevailed upon him to beg God to heal her. And so, against his better judgment, he prayed a different kind of prayer altogether. He prayed fervently, even while he understood what a long-shot that prayer was. And then when that prayer was over, he left that room. But a few days later he was back for another visit. The woman was sitting up in the bed. The tubes had been removed, and the curtains were open. She said to him, “You won't believe what has happened.” She said, “The doctors noticed some changes the other day, and called for more x-rays, and they have told me that they can no longer see any sign of a tumor! I'm going home tomorrow.”

The pastor said later, “When I got out to the parking lot, I looked up into the skies and said, ‘Don't ever do that to me again!’”

There's something about the power of God that ought to make us fear, because it's that unmanageable.

There's reason to fear when it comes to the power of God! This is the kind of fear those Israelites had out in the wilderness. They said to Moses, "You go up there on that mountain! We're scared...God's up there!"

What kind of person would you be if you had overcome the fear of God? This is one fear that we do not overcome; and should not overcome.

Maybe those disciples knew that, there in that boat, looking eyeball to eyeball at the danger in that water. Jesus Christ—that mysterious One, that disturbing One, that demanding One—had done the unlikely thing with that storm, so what unlikely thing was he about to do with them?

And what unlikely thing does he desire to do with us?

Let me tell you something. Because He is Who He is, because He does what He does and demands what He demands, there is danger in that water, too.

We look at water, sitting in a baptismal font so placid and serene as it is cupped in the hand and splashed upon some unsuspecting child, and we are tempted to think that it's so tame and comfortable. Moreover, we are tempted to think that baptism itself is so respectable and proper—as much a part of living as getting married or paying taxes. Until being shaped by that water—being formed by it and living under its terrifying challenge—becomes about as radical and a difficult a thing to do as going on a cruise.

C.S. Lewis has written somewhere that letting that fearsome mystery into your life is something like having your house redone; except that God does it according to God's own, wildly extravagant plans. Throwing up a new wing here and a new wing there, adding a floor, enlarging rooms, making grand windows where there once were only walls. You thought it was only going to be the addition of a gable or two. But God's plan is to build out of you a palace, so that God can come and dwell there.

No wonder those disciples were afraid. In the presence of that kind of God, who wouldn't be? For what can be safe, in such a presence? Anything? Anyone? No.

Now I'm sure you know something about the church. It's a respectable institution making its productive contributions to society. The church is like a family which people come to be a part of. You know something about the church as a program center, where folks can come to take classes or serve or to meet people. But, for God's sake, let us not underestimate the church as a vessel that contains a terrifying presence, which has frightening power—the power to transform, the power to make of each of us something we hadn't figured on, power that can get us in so deep that we won't know how to get out. It's the power to redeem, yes, but it's terrifying power all the same.

As we take our positions, steering or crewing this amazing vessel which is the church, for God's sake, for the love of God, let us not forget about the danger in the water.

To the Lord our God, Alpha and Omega, be all glory and honor forever. Amen.