

Through Storms to the Goal

Sermon by Marcel Rebiai

Today we will consider Luke 8:22-25.

"One day Jesus said to his disciples, "Let's go over to the other side of the lake." So they got into a boat and set out. As they sailed, Jesus fell asleep. A squall came down on the lake, so that the boat was nearly swamped, and they were in great danger. The disciples went and woke Jesus, saying, "Master, Master, we're going to drown!" He got up and rebuked the wind and the raging waters; the storm subsided, and all was calm. "Where is your faith?" (or: "Oh you of little faith, what were you afraid of?"), he asked his disciples. In fear and amazement they asked one another, "Who is this that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him."

This report of a storm on the Sea of Galilee is very striking, even though it may be difficult for us to picture how there could have been such strong waves on this relatively small lake. But I have been told that the wind there really can produce alarming conditions. So I can picture that the small fishing boats of those days were tossed around like walnut shells and could easily have capsized. It's also possible that the disciples couldn't swim.

In any case, Jesus' instructions were clear. He told his disciples, "Get into the boat. We're going to the other shore." Then he fell asleep. The disciples ran into a severe storm. It was so dangerous that even these experienced fishermen feared for their lives. They cried out, "We'll be destroyed! We're drowning!"

If we look at this story more closely we realize that their words are still very relevant for us. This is first of all a story about discipleship. Just as Jesus called the disciples, he calls us today to come and get into his boat. He tells us the objective, "Let's go to the other shore." When Jesus calls us, he always gives us a goal. In God's kingdom there is no such thing as the lack of a purpose or content. And because there is a destination, there is also a way. Jesus sends us on this route. "Get into the boat and sail across the water to the other side."

It is no coincidence that the way leads over the water. We are aware of what water symbolizes. It is not man's element. Without help and protection, man cannot survive long in it. It not only engulfs us, it is also filled with mysterious creatures. And Jesus says, "Go across the water to the other shore." This journey can be traveled only by boat. It's impossible to run across, as we do on land where we have the feeling we can determine our own steps. In a boat we are at the mercy of the navigator. Jesus sends us out on the water in order to reach the goal he has in mind for us. This is a route we have no control over.

If we want to be honest, we actually never have control over our lives - no matter how much we want it and strive for it with all our means. Because we don't control our lives, we cannot determine whether we will fall ill, when we will die, or how long we would like to live. Of course a person can end his life. But if he thinks that with this he can escape from himself and his creator, he will have a rude awakening. In the Bible it says, "God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows" (Gal. 6:7).

Being at someone else's mercy frightens us

There are things in our lives which we cannot influence. As humans, we are simply at the mercy of many eventualities. Even if we are paying attention we cannot alter, for example, that a person who has become irresponsible - who has perhaps drunk too much - one day loses control over his car and runs us down. There's nothing we can do about this. This feeling of being at someone's mercy frightens us. In this world humans are on their own, at the mercy of others. We are at the mercy of all those forces which can destroy life. We may write many books about life. We may think up theories and formulas to help. But ultimately we do not have our lives in our own hands.

We know Jesus' story of the rich farmer (Luke 12:16-21), who thought he could get his life under control. So he built a huge barn and filled it with grain, i.e. with security, pleasure, enjoyment, health and whatever else we think of in connection with a pleasant and secure life. Then he said to himself, "Now, my soul, you can enjoy life." In other words, "Now I have rid myself of all insecurity, all pressure, all worries - now I can be happy." And then what do we read about him? "You fool! This very night you will die."

What happens with all our security? Do we think we have our lives under control? No one does! Many try to sell some form of security. We Swiss are very familiar with this phenomenon. Why do we have so many insurance companies here? I think it is because we want to have security in at least some aspects of life. Being exposed and afraid are existential realities for mankind. We are afraid of illness, loneliness, failure, not being loved, wounds, pain, war and catastrophes. Ultimately we are afraid of death. Ever one is frightened of death because it is the supreme moment when we have no control whatsoever. It is the moment we have to let go of everything because everything is simply out of our hands.

Woe to the person who plunges into a dark abyss because in his heart he does not know about the loving hands of God's son. Jesus catches us, saying, "Good and faithful servant, enter into your master's joy." It seems to me that there can be no greater terror than for a person to realize at death what it really means to be lost and at another's mercy. This fear is so real that Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble. [Many German translations read, "you will have fear".] But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Fear and being at others' mercy are the mark of a godless world; a world which does not know God, or does not know him sufficiently. This fear which attacks us from without in multiple forms and images of terror, as well as resulting from our own unsaved lives, always tells us, "You're lost! You have no future!"

Jesus sent his disciples across the lake with a goal. It is important to keep in mind that this story is about Jesus' disciples who entrusted themselves to him. He sent them to the boat and said, "Go over to the other shore." Jesus gives all his disciples a destination - a common goal. He says, "Get into the boat and I will bring you over into life, into my kingdom, into the fulfillment of your life." That is the great terminus.

But along the way there are many sub-ordinate targets. There can be different callings or within a calling different tasks and phases, in which Jesus calls us and says, "Come, get in here, I am with you." And even when we do so in faith and obedience, setting out for the goal, we encounter hurdles, difficulties and sometimes impossibilities. We experience the storms and the shaking, even though Jesus called us specifically to the boat. He does not prevent the storm. He does not spare us the experience of being threatened and frightened. How else could we ever fathom the words, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff comfort me" (Ps. 23:4)? Only a person who in such gloom and darkness has experienced God's firm hands, the comfort of the shepherd, will be fully released from existential fear and become capable of living abundantly.

We often have the impression that following Jesus, serving him, obeying him means to be shielded from pain, trouble and suffering. At least he should see that we don't fall ill, that our families are free of accidents, that we don't get into trouble or fail. But Jesus does not always act according to our finite hopes and expectations. It seems that he has a different view of things pertaining to our lives. Then we can become very disappointed - because we misunderstand him. We always tend to seek outward security; Jesus' goal is to lead us to fulfillment, to bring us to his destination - not ours. Our purpose is always to reach Paradise as quickly and easily as possible, without pain and suffering. But that is not necessarily God's intention.

"In the presence of my enemies"

God's purpose is that in this world, in the midst of the storm, in the darkness, in the midst of all the powers which surround us - we experience his presence. He is lord over life and death. He is lord over all the powers around us. He is the lord who deals with fear. We read of him in Col. 2:15,

"He disarmed [all] the powers and authorities."

He wants each individual to experience this. His ambition is that I know him, not that - because I serve him - I get through life unscathed. He is the one who can heal me completely when I get scathed.

Luke's account of the storm reminds us of the story of Peter in Matt. 14:22-33. As Jesus is walking on the water toward the disciples, he challenges Peter,

"Come on the water, come to me."

Peter takes up the challenge, only to experience that Jesus does not prevent a giant wave from approaching. Jesus must have known that this would frighten Peter. But he doesn't prevent it. He wants Peter to experience that he is Lord over heaven and earth, Lord of the natural laws and the destructive powers which reign over this world and which man is at the mercy of.

Jesus wants so much that we know who he is. But where would we learn this if not in the situation where he conquers these powers in front of our eyes, the powers which try to break our heart in order to enslave our spirit and our soul? We would prefer not even to have anything to do with these powers. But Jesus does not prevent us from being shaken on the path he called us to. It doesn't say in Psalm 23, "You prepare a table before me in the absence of my enemies", but "You prepare a table in the PRESENCE of my enemies." Where I look into the eyes of my enemies, i.e. my problems - no matter how fearsome they may be - he prepares a table for me IN their presence.

The disciples began to cry out with fear. They probably scrambled to bail the water out of the boat. The way I appraise Peter, he probably grabbed the nearest bailer and called to the others, "Come on and help bail water!" But when he and the others realized that they couldn't control the situation they went to Jesus. This is what I admire about Peter. In the end he always saw where he could get help. Even when he was sinking he didn't lose hope, but called out to his lord, "Lord, help me!"

The disciples' cry for help in this situation is not without a reproach, "Wake up, Jesus, how can you sleep while we're going under?" Don't we, too, often have the feeling when we are in trouble that Jesus is sleeping? Or that he isn't interested in our situation. He doesn't even seem to notice that we are going under. How often have we thought this and thrown around the "why" questions? Why don't you answer? Why are you so far away? Why do you abandon me? Why don't you help me? In short, why are you sleeping? These "why" questions often become accusations. "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" (Mark 4:38). "Are you indifferent to my lot? I'm about to go under and it's your fault because you aren't intervening!"

The disciples went to Jesus with just such an accusation. Jesus' answer revealed his painful disappointment at how little his disciples knew his heart and his authority. Thank God the disciples came to him. But that wasn't enough. Jesus said, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" We could put it another way, "Do you know me so inadequately? Have you still not understood who I am?" We must not forget that the disciples got into the boat shortly after they had seen Jesus feed 5,000 people with a few fish and pieces of bread. They had just seen that he was lord over natural laws. Now a strong wind and high waves are enough to make them forget everything!

What saddens Jesus is the fact that we so often and so quickly misunderstand him and think he could actually abandon us. Do we hear him saying, "How could I be indifferent about your life? I gave my life for you! Where is your faith?" We must hold on to one thing: Jesus brings us to our destination. Every person who gets into the boat with Jesus in order to go

over to the other shore will reach that terminus. Crossing the fearsome water, right through powers painting hideous pictures threatening our destruction, Jesus states, "I will bring you to the goal!" He wants his image to crystallize in our hearts while we are crossing over this lake en route to our destination. He wants our faith and our trust to grow.

Trust like a child

Jesus wants us to know him more and more deeply and to experience what he does in life-threatening situations. He, the lord of the universe, calls to us, "Come to me, you who are driven, who are burdened with fears and doubts. I want to give you rest." He waits for our profession of trust and faith,

"Lord, I know that you are bringing me to your destination. I know that nothing can happen to me which does not serve for my best. I know that everything I encounter must first pass through your loving heart. Give me strength to wait for you to act. You won't desert me!" And Jesus will answer, "I'm here. Be comforted! Trust me. Relax. I am lord of the situation."

In 1 John 4:18 we read, "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear." The deeper our heart comprehends what love God expresses in his son Jesus, the more fear must loosen its grasp until all of its power over us is gone. Trust, relaxation and peace are part of our inheritance on our trip to the other shore! What we need is simple, child-like trust. "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31).

The childlike heart, to whom God's kingdom is promised and which will certainly reach God's destination, is secure that his heavenly father is absolutely on his side. This is the father who sent his beloved son into the deepest darkness in order to liberate and save us. Jesus makes unmistakably clear that we can neither understand nor reach God's goals if we don't have the same uncomplicated trust in him as little children do. It is that same heart attitude which Jesus himself had to the father. He could say, "Father, I know that you always hear me" (John 11:42). He knew he could encounter nothing which did not first pass through the father. And the father never sleeps, not even for a moment. "Indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep" (Ps. 121:4).

Getting into the boat with Jesus and crossing over the lake means that I will certainly have an adventurous life. Every life with Jesus is an adventure because there are many storms to survive. Paul says of those who follow after Jesus, "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). No one will be spared this challenging path. Why? So that we can learn that we really have no reason to fear. The powers have been overcome; they can not injure the core of our lives. They can shake us like grain - which ultimately serves only to free us from the chaff. But that does not destroy us.

So when our desire for security sounds an alarm because the storms and fears become ominous, we can hold fast to the fact that our boat will not capsize. God brings us to the goal. With certainty. Not one will go under or drown on the way after getting into Jesus' boat and holding fast to him like a child. He is the lord over heaven and earth. He has overcome and disarmed all the life-threatening powers.

We should encourage one another when we see that storms are gathering; we should remind each other that Jesus is not absent, but that we are called to trust him with our whole hearts in the midst of all our fears. This is true for the short stretches on our path of life as well as for the long ones. Just as Jesus does not go under, nor will we. The lord who commands the wind and the waves can actually change our situation from one moment to the next. Amen.

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