

In God's Good Time

In the name of the Lord of Life and Salvation, dear friends in Christ: Last week when we met for worship we spent some time reflecting upon the story of Jesus stilling a storm on the Sea of Galilee. Even if you weren't here, I'm sure you remember it. Jesus and the disciples are crossing from one side of the lake to the other. A sudden squall arises. The wind howls and waves smash against the side of the boat. It's all the disciples can do simply to hang on. They're frantically bailing the water that's filling their little craft, threatening to swamp it. Meanwhile Jesus is peacefully sleeping in the stern-sheets. In their panic, the disciples wake him—though what exactly they expect him to do is unclear. But Jesus takes charge of the situation. He simply rebukes the wind and waves, which obey his voice. All at once everything is calm; but then Jesus turns and also rebukes his disciples. "What's wrong with you guys?" he asks. "Have you still no faith at all?" For their part, the disciples are dumbstruck. "Who is this", they ask, "that even wind and sea obey him?"

The answer, of course, is that he is the Lord who created the wind and sea in the first place. As we considered the story, we saw that his ability to command the forces of nature is more than just proof of his divinity. More importantly, we saw that the lesson of this story is that the Lord in his wisdom often sends us sailing into various storms of life, which are at all times and in every way under his control. These storms, in whatever form they take, *he creates* for our ultimate good because, among other beneficial things, they lead us to repentance, cause us to turn to Jesus, increase our faith in him, and they cause our Christian character to mature. The main point I was driving at is how we can trust Jesus completely during such storms. He's with us in the boat. He's with us enduring everything that we do. And knowing that he's with us means that we can be absolutely confident that there is never any real danger to us. As long as we are with Jesus, we're safe. So even if he doesn't stop the storm that surrounds us right away, what this ought to do at very least is have the effect of calming the storms within: the storms of fear and doubt and despair that rage in our hearts and minds. Though all hell is breaking loose around us, we can be supremely confident that the Lord knows exactly what he's doing and therefore we can experience perfect peace within.

All of this is true; and inspired by today's Gospel this morning I want to build on this idea. But first a corrective is in order. Someone might think, "Since the Lord is in complete control of what's happening in my life, there's nothing I can do. When one of these storms of life comes along, what I ought to do is sit back and ride it out passively, and let the chips fall where they may." For example, a person who's diagnosed with a disease of some kind might think, "If the Lord wants me to get better, he'll heal me. If not, well, then there's nothing I or any doctor can do about it; so I'll do nothing and just wait and see what happens." Or a person who loses a job might think, "If the Lord wants me to go back to work, he'll give me a new job; so in the meantime I'll just sit on the couch, watch TV, and eat *Cheetos* until the phone rings."

That's the wrong way to look at it. I mean, yes, in a sense it's true that only the Lord heals, and without his blessing no would ever be able to work; but we also understand that the Lord works in this world primarily through the means he has appointed. He's given us doctors and medicines to help cure our ailments. It's right that we use them. And he's given us feet and a brain. So if you lose your job, go find another one. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to acquire a few more skills to make yourself more marketable. Just because Jesus is in control of the storm, doesn't mean that the disciples don't have to bail the water and work at the oars to keep the

bow pointed into the wind. If they didn't, their boat would have sunk long before the Lord delivered them. We are still to do all that we can—*and place our trust* in the Lord.

But that leads us to today's main topic, which has to do with timing. The Lord directs us into storms or otherwise causes them to come into our lives. We've seen that. And when we're in the middle of one, the big question on our minds is: when will he end it? In last week's story, as soon as the disciples cried out to Jesus, he answered. He brought their crisis to an immediate end. You probably know from personal experience that it doesn't always work that way. More often it happens that to get his desired result in our lives, it takes time. The Lord's priorities are not necessarily our own. When faced with a crisis of some kind, we want it over with right now. He, on the other hand, has other ideas. Like a cake in the oven, he doesn't want to pull us out of the heat until we're done cooking. That's what we see revealed in a couple of today's readings.

In fact, today's Gospel lesson is a study in the Lord's timing. Let me set this up. The story takes place in the city of Capernaum, which was Jesus' primary base of operations during his Galilean ministry. Typically he'd spend a few weeks there, and then go off on a preaching and teaching tour of other places around the lake; always returning to Capernaum. And while he was in Capernaum, he would preach regularly at the synagogue there. It was the synagogue for which Jairus was responsible. Our text calls him a synagogue ruler, which we might think of as being the president of the congregation or the head elder, perhaps. The point is that he knew Jesus quite well. He was the one responsible for setting up services and allowing Jesus to teach there. It means too that he personally witnessed many of the healing miracles that Jesus performed. So when his daughter fell ill, he knew that Jesus could heal her.

The problem for him was that Jesus had gone away on one of his preaching tours, and there was no indication when he might be back. So for Jairus and his wife, their daughter's illness seems to be a case of terribly bad timing. Picture them at her bedside, watching her grow progressively worse, her labored breathing becoming nothing more than shallow gasping, her strength ebbing away. If only she can hang on until Jesus returns. With all their might, that's what they pray for. No doubt they've got lookouts posted down by the shore to bring them any word – any sign of hope. But as the minutes and hours tick by, it looks less and less like their daughter is going to make it. The heartache they feel is almost unbearable.

Then, when all seems lost, the hopeful news comes. The boat that Jesus left in several days ago has been sighted. It's still too far away to tell exactly who is on it; but Jairus has to take the chance that Jesus is. Leaving his deathly ill daughter in his wife's care, he runs down to the shore where he finds a large crowd already gathering. He's not the only one who will be clamoring for Jesus' attention. No matter; he's convinced that Jesus will agree that his situation is the most urgent matter pending. By using the leverage of his elevated social standing where it will work and his elbows on whom it won't, he manages to push his way through to the front of the crowd. Still, the distant boat seems to take forever to make its landing. "Please hurry up, will you? Don't those guys know that this is a matter of life and death? ... Well, of course not; how could they?" So it becomes a prayer. And the whole time Jairus is struggling with the shifting crowd to keep his place up front. At length, he's relieved to see that Jesus is indeed aboard the boat. "There may be hope after all – if only we can get there in time. If only I can get to Jesus first."

As soon as the boat runs up on the sandy beach, Jairus lunges forward. He falls at the feet of Jesus with his desperate plea. "You must come at once. There's not a second to lose." Jesus agrees to come; but it's awfully slow going. The rest of the crowd isn't cooperating at all.

Everyone is still thronging around him, shouting out questions, describing their ailments and complaints. Some are trying to press him with gifts in thanks for things he'd done for them in the past. Others are just celebrating his return – but everybody, it seems, wants a piece of Jesus and a moment of his time. So Jairus is doing everything short of pulling Jesus along with one hand while, shoulder down, he plows through the mass of humanity like an offensive lineman making a hole for the ball carrier.

Then Jesus abruptly stops behind him. “Who touched me?” he asks. It seems a silly question. Dozens of people have put their hands on his shoulder or brushed up against him in the short time since his return. The disciples point out this obvious truth. And if you put yourself in Jairus’ sandals, you’re thinking, “Who cares who touched you? We haven’t got time for this.” But Jesus is adamant. He stands looking around in the crowd for the person he knows has just experienced a miraculous healing. After what seems another eternity to Jairus, a trembling woman comes forward. She’s terrified that she’s done something wrong – and according to the social customs of the time, she has. But no longer able to conceal her identity, she falls at Jesus’ feet and goes into a lengthy explanation. For twelve years she’s been afflicted with a profoundly personal problem with constant bleeding. Besides the obvious deleterious effects to her health like anemia, under Jewish law the condition has rendered her perpetually unclean. As a result she’s had no contact with other people, no family life to speak of, no participation in the worship life of the community. She’s been subject to a miserable, lonely existence – one that also left her destitute because she spent everything she owned on treatments that only made her condition worse. So yes, in order to get to Jesus she had to break the rules. She, an unclean woman, who shouldn’t have even been in a public place, had to fight her way through the unsuspecting crowd in order to touch a holy man she believed could cure her. And now, feeling humiliated, she’s had to tell the whole world what she’s done. But Jesus surprises her. Rather than rebuke her for violating a number of ceremonial rules as she expects he will, Jesus commends her for her great faith and bids her go in peace, her health fully restored.

But place yourself in Jairus’ sandals. You’re listening to all this, and you can’t believe what you’re hearing. You’re thinking, “Lady, you’ve had this problem for twelve years! It wasn’t life threatening. Couldn’t you have waited just a few more minutes? And Jesus, what are you thinking? Can’t you see that my daughter’s situation is so much more pressing than standing here in the street listening to this woman tell her whole pathetic life story?”

And right then is when word comes from the house. Too late. Don’t bother Jesus any more. Your daughter is dead. Under normal circumstances such information is the worst thing a parent can hear; but in this case it’s exacerbated by having hope raised to such heights at the last minute – only now to be dashed by what seems to be a lot of wasteful interference. So Jairus is filled to overflowing with a combination of grief, anger, frustration, and bitter disappointment in himself, no doubt; but even more in Jesus. If only he had not gone away to begin with. If only he had hurried up. If only he hadn’t stopped to deal with that woman and her comparatively minor problem ... *my daughter would be alive.*

But he who commands the forces of nature like the wind and waves is also in command of time. It was the Lord’s will to bring Jairus, a man who trusted in Jesus, to this point of desperation, doubt, and fear precisely so that he could increase his faith farther still. It’s just as he’s about to be washed overboard in one of life’s storms that Jesus puts his hand on Jairus’ shoulder and says, “I’m not done yet. Keep trusting me. You trusted me to save you daughter while she was alive. Now trust me to save her from the grip of death.”

You know how the story turns out. I don't need to repeat the happy ending. What's more important, though, is that we apply the lesson of the story to our lives. It's about our Lord's use of time. It took a storm lasting twelve years to bring a certain woman to the place that she was willing to abandon hope in everything else, risk public humiliation, and reach out in trust to Jesus. For Jairus, it took being taken to the place where he thought "it's too late" to prove to him that for those who trust Jesus, it's never too late.

The point is that the Lord's timing is perfect. When something goes wrong, we often think, "Oh! This couldn't have come at a worse time!" Other times we're likely to think that the Lord's priorities seem out of whack. We wonder why he seems to be overlooking what we consider to be the most urgent matters facing our families, our church, and our nation. And still other times we think, "This has gone on way too long. I don't think I can take any more. Lord, end it now."

All such thoughts miss the point. All such thoughts show a lack of faith. The Lord who controls all things, also controls the times and seasons. He knew exactly when in the history of this world to send his Son into our flesh, he knew exactly when to have him carry the cross for our sins, he knew exactly when to raise him up from the dead and exalt him to his throne of power, and he knows exactly when he will send him back to judge the living and the dead. It all happens in God's good time. The same is true for the times and seasons that he has appointed for each of us. All are designed by him to bring us to the happy ending.

May we then use the time he's assigned us for what's it's for: to repent of our sins and lack of trust, to build ourselves up in holy faith, to bear witness to the salvation we have in Christ Jesus, and to share the love of God by works of service to others while we await with quiet confidence the salvation of the Lord – for it will surely come in God's good time. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!