

In December 2018 a movie was released called “Breakthrough.” This movie chronicled the true-life story of John Smith, a 14-year-old boy from Missouri who fell through the ice on a lake and was submerged underwater for 15 minutes. His parents rushed to the hospital when they heard the news and his situation looked bleak, however his mom was not willing to give up on him.

The doctors did CPR but could not restart his heart. When his mother, Joyce, got to see him, he had been without a pulse for 43 minutes. She touched his cold feet, but was unable to accept that he was dead.

She immediately started praying over her son and calling upon the power of the Holy Spirit. His heart which has been stopped for 43 minutes jumped back to life. His mother, Joyce, credits his recovery, which took 4 years, to God.

That is the power of prayer, that is the power of relying on God.

I tell you this story today because resurrection is still happening all around us if only, we fully put our trust in Jesus Christ.

Today during our sermon time, we are going to do something a little different. We will spend some time meditating upon our Gospel lesson for today from Matthew 8 and Rembrandt’s famous painting which depicts this Scripture entitled: “The Storm on the Sea of Galilee” which you all have received a copy of today.

This practice is called “Visio Divina” and it is “an imaginative and refreshing form of Scripture meditation that helps us to enter into the narrative of Scripture and bring ourselves to Jesus.”ⁱ What is interesting is that Rembrandt painted his face into this picture, inviting us also to see ourselves in this story.ⁱⁱ

First, we must look at the what? What is happening?

We see, in Rembrandt’s only seascape painting, that a horrible storm is happening. Waves are crashing against the boat; the sail has been split into two. It seems that the end is coming for all aboard the boat and they are about to drown. Although the most intriguing part about the painting is not what is happening, but how each disciple is reacting to the dramatic scene unfolding before them.

Now take a moment, what do you notice? What part of the painting or character in it does God especially draw your attention to?

Now we will go through the posture of each disciple on the boat and ask ourselves who might we be like today in our faith journey with Jesus Christ.

First, we start in the upper left corner of the painting. There is a man in an orange shirt, and he is actively trying to fix the sail. We know many of the disciples were fisherman, so perhaps this man was just doing his job and innately started to trim the sail. This man seems to be a leader and is taking charge of the situation.

As we look downwards from the top, we see three men, who also seem to be experienced fishermen. They too seem to be focused on fixing the problem at hand. They are at the mast and “frantically trying to fix the main sail...the gale winds have ripped it and snapped the metal wire so that the boom is disconnected from the mast.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Like these experienced fishermen, maybe at this point of your faith journey you feel confident about what God is calling you to do and you do it innately. You are not worried and do not have second thoughts about relying on God. You may be feeling strong in your faith.

In immediate contrast, as we look downwards at the painting, we see a man in white in right in the strike zone of the wave. Unlike the trained fishermen, he is not actively working to the fix the problem, but simply hanging on for dear life as he braces himself against the boat.

Maybe this is how you feel in your faith journey today, you may be asking God why and feel like you are being hit with wave after wave of problems in your life.

Now we move across the painting to the man on the top at the right side. He is crouched over in fear watching wave after wave hit the boat. Perhaps he does know what to do but is unable to act because he is paralyzed with fear. Perhaps this is where you find yourself today. Wanting to trust in God’s new direction in your life but paralyzed with the fear that accompanies trying something new.

Now we move to the lower right corner of the boat to the man in red leaning over the side of the boat. This man may want to help those on the boat, but the fear and anxiety that he is experiencing is making him sick. Maybe this is where you find yourself today, sick with anxiety or fear as you worry about a situation in your life or the life of a loved one. Wanting to fully surrender this burden to God, but unable to because you want to feel as if you have some semblance of control over your life.

Maybe you are not afraid today, but maybe you are angry with God.

As we look at the two disciples closest to Jesus, we see that they are angry with him: “One shakes him awake and the other raises his voice, ‘Teacher! Don’t you care if we drown!’”^{iv}

Maybe you came to church today feeling like God is sleeping on the job. Perhaps you have been praying and praying and feel that you have not yet seen results or heard an answer from God. Like these two disciples, it is easy for us in our humanity to become frustrated with God when we do not think God is taking immediate action, and yet as this Scripture shows us, God always responds on God’s time.

On the lower left side of the boat behind the man getting sick is a man that is the easiest to miss in this picture. He is praying. His head is bowed, and he seems to be more at peace than his boatmates, even amid this scene of chaos.

Maybe you are like this man. In the storm of life your go to is prayer. Perhaps you too have felt the peace of Jesus Christ through prayer. Rembrandt painted what looks like a halo over this man’s head to show his faithfulness.^v

Next, we go to the man in blue holding onto the wire. This is Rembrandt’s self-portrait of himself.^{vi} He is the only one looking out into the audience inviting us into the story. He looks out into the ocean with lost eyes. These lost eyes can mean so many things to us. Perhaps you are feeling lost today and don’t know which way to go. Maybe you are journeying with someone who is lost or is battling addiction. We have all had moments in life when we know God is with us, but we don’t know which way to go.

Now we look to the back of the boat, the man desperately holding onto the tiller and trying to steer the rudder of the boat. Maybe this is how you are feeling today. It is all you can do to continue to stay on course through your faith in Jesus. You may feel like you are doing all you can to follow Christ, but the storms of life keep throwing you off course.

The second to last person we look at is the man who has his back to us in white. His head is not bowed in prayer, but it seems like he is looking at something. Maybe he has seen a vision or even an angel.

Perhaps this is true for your life today, God has given you the foresight that God is with you even in the storms of life, but you are not yet able to act in the direction in which God is calling you to go.

Finally, we look at Jesus. It seems like Jesus is backing away from the one shaking him as if he has just awoken. He does not look afraid. Jesus is engaged in this conversation with the disciples who are asking him to still the storm which reminds us Christ listens to us when we pray during the storms of our lives.

As others have described this painting, many point to the full trajectory of Jesus’ gaze as it goes beyond the scared disciples to the opening of the clouds, as it seems Jesus is drawing strength and direction from God the father.^{vii}

Finally, notice the light in this picture: it is not just coming from the heavens it’s also glowing from Jesus’s body! Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God! He is the Light of the World and the Prince of Peace!”^{viii}

We know the end of this Scripture, that once again God saved the disciples through calming the sea.

The good news for our lives today is during the storms of our lives, Jesus comes and calms our souls. Jesus reigns over our lives as we are called to fully rely on God.

But just as the disciples depicted in Rembrandt’s painting, we too find it difficult to fully rely on God.

The Apostle Paul also found himself in this situation. On this fifth week as we follow the life and ministry of Paul, we recount two different trips he took. In Acts, we see Paul go on his second missionary journey to Athens.^{ix} There he found he had to change the way he shared about Jesus Christ for his very learned audience. Rob Fuquay tells us, “Instead of quoting Scripture, he quotes Greek philosophers” knowing his audience will understand his point better through this method.^x

While in Athens, Paul relies mostly on his knowledge rather than his faith in Jesus Christ. However, he changes his method again when he visits Corinth, as we see in Acts 18. When Paul later reflects on his experience in Corinth in 1st Corinthians 2 he shares that he desires his “faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.”^{xi}

There are many people in the Bible who came to this understanding that they must fully trust in God and not in their own abilities. In the Old Testament, Abraham was one of them. In fear he told Pharaoh that his wife was his sister, to preserve her life, but this tactic backfired, and God had to step in to save Sarah. We too sometimes act out of fear and yet our faith requires that we rely on God with all that we do.

Rob Fuquay challenges us today with the following question: “What are we currently doing that requires God to step in?”^{xii} He goes on to ask: “Could it be that the places God wants to lead us are the places that will make us more dependent?”^{xiii}

Fuquay reminds us that being faithful to God requires that we follow Christ, even when we are unsure where Christ is leading us. Whether it be directly into the storms of life or calm seas. Fuquay encourages us: “God calls us to be obedient, not successful.”^{xiv}

We fully surrender our lives to God, when we put our quest for success aside and make our life about doing the things God has called us to do.

So whatever storm you may be facing today know that God is with you and Jesus will calm your soul and give you strength to get through whatever you may face. Remember that God is always bringing life out of what we perceive is certain death and God will be with you always. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ <https://www.soulshepherding.org/with-jesus-in-the-storm-on-the-sea-of-galilee-a-meditation-on-rembrandts-painting/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.contemporary-art.org/Oil-Painting/Christ-In-The-Storm-On-The-Sea-Of-Galilee-Works-22685.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} <http://russ-ramsey.com/rembrandt-is-in-the-wind/>

^{vii} <https://www.soulshepherding.org/with-jesus-in-the-storm-on-the-sea-of-galilee-a-meditation-on-rembrandts-painting/>

^{viii} Ibid.

^{ix} Rob Fuquay. “Which Way, Lord?” Upper Room Books. 2017. P. 85.

^x Ibid. P. 86

^{xi} Ibid. P. 89

^{xii} Ibid, P. 91.

^{xiii} Ibid. P. 92.

^{xiv} Fuquay. P. 94.

Additional Resources

https://www.stltoday.com/lifestyles/health-med-fit/years-ago-a-st-charles-teen-was-under-a-frozen/article_43db7316-908b-5805-86e5-01fdc8eee581.html

“The New Interpreters Biblical Commentary.” Vol. III. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 1995.

NRSV Oremus Online Bible.