**Homily for the 12th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B**

**June 20, 2021**

**St. Bavo Parish**

**Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.**

*First Reading: Job 38:1, 8-11 (God’s mastery over the sea.)*

*Responsory: Psalm 107 (Give thanks to the Lord, his love is everlasting.)*

*Second Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:14-17 (Whoever is in Christ is a new creation.)*

*Gospel: Mark 4:35-41 (Jesus calms the wind and the sea.)*

Jesus astonished people with displays of divine power on many occasions, but the setting for this particular miracle makes it special and highly symbolic. For ancient peoples, *the sea* seemed to possess a supernatural quality. It was a place of great mystery and danger. Even today, we know less about the deep sea than we do about outer space. But, imagine how mysterious the sea would have seemed before the invention of scuba gear or submarines. Human beings could only float along the surface of the water, or explore its depths as far down as their nets could reach. Everything below that was totally unknown. Hence, in the popular imagination, the sea was the abode of monsters and demons. In the Old Testament, the sea, or “the abyss,” represents primordial chaos and evil. It’s a place where humans dare not go, but where *God* demonstrates his great power and absolute sovereignty.

We see this very clearly in the first reading, from the Book of Job. After Job has the audacity to question God’s justice, God appeals to his mastery over the sea in order to remind this mere human of just how puny and insignificant he is in comparison to the Almighty God. God asks Job, “Who shut within doors the sea, when it burst forth from the womb, when I made the clouds its garment and thick darkness its swaddling bands? When I set limits for it and fastened the bar of its door, and said: Thus far shall you come but no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stilled!” What could any human say to that, except, “You’re right, I’m sorry”?

Today’s Responsorial Psalm also contrasts God’s absolute power over the wind and the sea with man’s utter helplessness before such forces of nature. But, the Psalmist makes his point in a more positive way. He recalls the experience of sailors who were caught up in a terrifying storm, with wind and waves tossing them about. When they cried out to God in their distress, the Lord effortlessly rescued them and brought them home safely. God simply “hushed the storm to a gentle breeze, and the billows of the sea were stilled,” just as we saw in today’s gospel.

From the disciples’ reaction, it appears that they did not understand that Jesus possessed such power within himself. When they appealed to him for help, they probably expected him to pray to God for deliverance, like Moses in the Old Testament. They hoped that God would listen to Jesus because of his righteousness. But, Jesus did not raise up his hands in supplication and offer a prayer to the Almighty God, who *alone* has dominion over the wind and the sea. Instead, he just stood up in the boat and said to the sea, “Quiet! Be still!” Immediately, the wind ceased and the sea became calm, as if they were obeying the voice of God himself. The disciples rightly ask, “*Who is this* whom even the wind and sea obey?” They have just witnessed an epiphany. Jesus has shown them who he really is – not just God’s faithful servant, but *God in the flesh*.

Had the disciples understood this when the squall came up and began to swamp the boat, they would not have panicked in the first place. That’s why Jesus asks them after the fact, “Why are you terrified? Do you not have faith?” He means faith in *him*, their companion in the boat, not just faith in the unseen God. Jesus is suggesting that they need not panic as long as he is with them. They can have the same serenity that Jesus showed as he slept peacefully in the stern of the boat. In the Old Testament, untroubled sleep is a metaphor for trust in God’s protection. Here, Jesus is perfectly calm in the midst of the storm, for he knows that there is no need for concern as long as he is present. Once calm has been restored, Jesus challenges his disciples to find that same faith within themselves, so that they might *remain* at peace even in the most dire of circumstances.

That same invitation to faith also extends to us, of course. The storm at sea serves as a perfect metaphor for *any* situation in which we feel helpless and fearful. This COVID pandemic, for example, is like a massive and frightening storm, which seemed to rise up with the suddenness of a squall on the Sea of Galilee. Thank God, the waves here in our local area don’t seem to be crashing over the sides of the boat with the same ferocity that they once did. But, the storm definitely is not over yet. The danger is still very real, and the path ahead is still quite uncertain. And so, what we all need right now is a response of *faith*. We need to trust that Jesus is in the boat with us, and he is not going to let us drown.

Even in more “normal” times, various “storms” (in the metaphorical sense) seem to blow into our lives, upsetting our peace and testing our faith. In those moments, when we might be prone to panic, it might help to reflect on the image of Jesus asleep in the stern of the boat. We can ask ourselves, “Where does he find that deep sense of peace and calm in the midst of the storm? Could we find it, too? If we ask him, can it give it to us?” Jesus clearly implies that there was *never a need* for his disciples to be terrified. Faith in him would have cast out all their fear and replaced it with peace and serenity. Is that possible for us, too? We can hope and pray that it will.

However, one small detail in the gospel story hints at a potential obstacle to that peace. Notice what the disciples say to Jesus as they wake him up: “Teacher, *do you not care* that we are perishing?” They misinterpret Jesus’ serenity as *indifference*. They should be looking to Jesus as their *example*, saying to themselves, “Look, he’s at peace; maybe we should calm down, too.” But, instead, they assume that their panic is justified, and they accuse Jesus of not caring about them. Their unspoken assumption is, “If he cared, he would either make the problem go away, or he would at least validate our fears.” Faith counters that false assumption, reassuring us that the Lord *does* care, and that we can trust him at all times. Hence, we can plead with Jesus to rebuke the wind and the sea, to bring back a sense of calm, *but* we can also remain at peace with him, in the stern of the boat, *even as our storm rages on*.