



“And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. A windstorm arose on the seas, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves, but he was asleep. And they went and woke him up, saying, ‘Lord, save us! We are perishing!’ ... Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was dead calm. They were amazed, saying, ‘What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?’ (Matthew 8:23-27).

When I was 8 years old, I spent a summer on my great uncle’s dairy farm in rural New Hampshire. Everyday I would wake up early, eat my big breakfast with Uncle Ev and then head down to the dairy barn to help with the morning chores. I’m not certain how much help I was in milking the cows even though Uncle Ev assured me that singing Neil Diamond’s “Sweet Caroline” at the top of my lungs would surely help them produce even tastier milk.

As much as I enjoyed serenading my uncle’s dairy cows every morning, I have to admit that time spent high up in the hay lofts was even more fun. To an 8-year old, Uncle Ev’s barn was the greatest of Jungle Gyms. Ladder after ladder enticed me to climb higher and higher into the heavens, or at least to the eaves of the barn. Surely, there would be a ladder that would take me to the very top of the barn. As luck would have it, such a ladder existed. It was all fun and games until I heard Uncle Ev’s voice from far below calling me down for dinner, at which point it became all too clear just how high I had climbed. As I eyed the rungs of the ladder that had assisted my ascent, all I could focus on was the vast empty space that existed between me and the ground floor of the barn. It may have only been 40 feet, but it might as well have been 40 miles. Apprehension turned to fear which quickly led to panic. Convinced that reaching my leg to the empty rung of the adjacent ladder would surely lead to my death, I began to cry uncontrollably.

After what seemed an eternity of Uncle Ev unsuccessfully trying to cajole me to step out on the ladder and not look down, suddenly his calm and gentle voice arrived beside me. “I’ve got you Dougie. You’re going to be okay.” Uncle Ev had climbed all the way to the top of the ladder and was prepared to get me down. With tree-like limbs outstretched before me, Uncle Ev assured me he knew the way down and that all I had to do was reach out my own arms to his and together we would make the journey. Somehow just knowing he was there, I stepped out and followed him to safety. With every rung I descended, I knew that Uncle Ev was right below me and that he would let nothing bad befall me.

When we arrived below in the safety of terra firma, I just looked up at this towering man and marveled. “Who is this man, that he can climb fearlessly to astronomical heights to rescue me?” He was truly my hero. I wonder if the disciples had that same feeling of wonderment after Jesus relieved their fears by calming the storm. After all, this was not just any storm that Jesus rebuked; this was a violent tempest that had suddenly arisen from nowhere and was about to capsize their boat.

Of all the words that could have been used by Matthew to describe the storm, the word he chooses to use is “seismos.” We use that word when we describe an earthquake. Seismologists study earthquakes. Seismographs measure them and what Matthew tells us about the storm is that there was a great shaking of the boat, a shaking of the waves and a shaking of the horizon. Matthew only uses this word 2 other times in his gospel; once to describe the shaking of the earth at the crucifixion of Christ and the other to describe the shaking of the earth at the resurrection of Christ. Once to describe the forgiveness of sins and the other to describe the defeat of death.; and now he uses this word to describe how Christ conquers the turbulent storms of our lives and how he relieves our fears.

These past few weeks have felt like we are in a boat being tossed helplessly by a violent shaking of the world around us. The tempest of a deadly virus rages nearby, while the waves of lost wages and a downwardly spiraling economy threaten to capsize our lives. And in the midst of this storm, our church would appear to be closed, much like Jesus soundly sleeping in the bow of the boat. But the church is not closed. Our building may be, but the church who follows the storm-rebuking Jesus is very much awake. For you see, the church is not a building. The church is you and me.

You and I are the church when we engage in the work of compassion and mercy. You and I are the church when we show love and do justice. Church doesn’t just happen for an hour on Sunday morning. When the love of Jesus is lived out in our lives, we become the hymns, the prayers, and the sermons of the church. When we are providing “grab and go” meals at Mustard Seed Kitchen we are the holy ground upon which the church rests. When we are praying for the world and checking in with our neighbors to make sure they are well, we are the body of Christ broken and given for the world.

In short, you and I are the good news seismologists, who through our simple actions of love and compassion, provide respite in the midst of the chaotic and earth-shaking tempest around us. You and I are the good news seismologists, who through our simple actions of love and compassion, provide the guiding hands who lead that frightened 8-year old down from the hayloft to the place of safety below.

We are being tossed by a great “seismos” in ways that many of us have never experienced and that is frightening. But in the midst of it all, we are the church, the body of our Lord – and though our building may be closed, with Christ at our side, we will always be open.

Peace and Love,
Pastor Doug