

Do You Care?

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Sometimes stories in the bible are a little light on details.

But since the very beginnings of the church, we have been able to turn to the imagination of artists to help fill out the scenes.

One of my favorite paintings of a biblical story is a painting by Rembrandt of this story we just heard,

it is called “Storm on the Sea of Galilee” and it is the only seascape Rembrandt ever painted.

The drama of the roiling water, captures in the crash of light from the left side of the image.

The familiar image of a sky changing in an instant from clear blue, to the inky ominous clouds on the right that become nearly indistinguishable from the dark churning sea.

And all that natural drama, all that primordial chaos, that surrounds the edges of the scene is reflected in what is going on on the deck of ship.

Look at this detail of the scene on board. Now let’s get one straight right away. This is not what the disciples looked like. Nor Jesus. In the custom of the vast majority of western artists these middle eastern characters have been given the features and skin tones of 18th century Europeans.

Now, I think we can still look at these old paintings, we can allow them to inform our imaginations, and we can glean from them lessons about faith. But we cannot let them form our exclusive image of who Jesus is, lest we limit our ability to see the image of God in all people today.

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The story goes that Jesus and his disciples had boarded a boat to cross the sea when a huge storm came upon them. The winds whipped up. The sea heaved. The boat was being swamped.

Jesus though, was asleep, on a cushion by the stern.

I don’t know about you, but this precise moment of the story feels pretty relatable to me right now. It feels like as a world we are in the throws of a storm. And many of our personal worlds feel that way too.

We are in storms of grief. Storms of reckoning. Storms of uncertainty about what will come next. Storms of overwhelm, exhausted by day, after day, after day.

Its one of the reasons I love Rembrandt's painting. It captures this precise moment.

The moment when Jesus near the stern is just being roused, And we get this snapshot of the variety of human responses to a storm.

I wonder if you can find yourself on this boat?

Are you like the disciples at the bow, pouring every ounce of your strength into staying afloat? Straining with all your might against the wind and the waves? Singular focus, rapt by the task right in front of you?

I see healthcare workers who just have to deal with the next patient, one by one, no time to sit with perspective over the whole of the crisis, just enough energy to deal with the next problem put in front of them.

I see parents who are just trying to get to the next meal, or the next nap.

There is something kind of heroic looking about these guys. But also something kind of futile...

Or maybe you feel like this. Just simply afraid. Pulling back and away. I imagine that any of us can relate to this disciple. Who just really wants no part of this, but also knows he is stuck on this boat for the time being.

Speaking of relatable

There is this guy, wrenching over the edge, driven beyond his physical limits, made sick by the pitching and heaving.

And then there are the men at the stern. Who we catch here just in the moment of having woken up Jesus. Desperation written on their faces. As one in the foreground has simply fallen to his knees in prayer.

Here they all are, crowded together in a boat that suddenly seems a way too small. For them, and for the storm they have met.

We've all been in that boat. I would venture to say plenty of us are right now.

And every one of those reactions is relatable. Everyone understandable. Everyone so perfectly human.

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So, what happens next?

Well Jesus' disciples ask him a question. A biting question. A question that most of us have cried out to God at one time or another from the middle of life's storms.

"Do you not care?" "Do you not care that we are perishing?"

And in the story, Jesus calms the water and the wind, with a few words. And we are left with a pretty tidy miracle. No harm. No foul.

And then Jesus asks them a question, "why were you afraid?" I can't imagine what it would have felt like to be asked that question by the recently awoken Christ.

Dripping with sea spray, sickened by the swells, hands burning from struggling with line and sail.

It would have been hard for me not to reply, "Why were we afraid? What do you think?"

And then he adds, the kicker, "have you still no faith?"

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I like that Rembrandt's picture precedes the conclusion of this miracle. That he chose not to depict the victorious Christ rebuking the wind and waves, but rather the struggling disciples, toiling against the struggle of life, wondering what on Earth God is up to.

That is the part of the story I find most relatable.

And what does it mean to have faith in a moment like this? Well, I don't think that Jesus meant to say, "didn't you know I would make the storm stop?"

I think that what he meant to say simply was, "didn't you remember that I was here?"

Because you and I don't live in a world where storms magically stop on a dime.

You and I do not live in a world where pandemics just end because we wish them to.

You and I do not live in a world where generations-old systems of white supremacy evaporate because we want them to.

The image of Jesus who snaps his fingers and fixes problems is one that, for whatever reason, is confined to history.

What I love about this story. Where I find comfort. Where I find hope. Where I see a miracle. Is that Jesus is in the boat.

Jesus is in the boat.

He is there with them. With us. He has tied himself up in their fate. He has cast in his common lot with us.

And that is the piece of this story that is not confined to history. That is the miracle that is as true today as it was in that little boat two-thousand years ago.

Jesus can say to us when we are straining against the tempest, curled in the corner, or losing our lunch over the edge.

“Remember that I am here. I am with you. Always.”

In our story, it doesn't wrap up in a tidy bow. And this sermon does not have a simple answer.

In our story, we are still crying out to God, “don't you care?”

In our story we are right in this moment.

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One more interesting detail about this painting.

Famously, there are 12 disciples.

Here they are.

And then there is Jesus there at the stern.

But there is more more figure to account for.

Right here

Looking right at us.

The 13th disciple in the boat. With his hand on his head in frozen disbelief.

Its Rembrandt. This is not just a seascape. It is a self-portrait.

He is looking at us as if to make sure we are with him, which of course we are. To make certain we are getting what he is showing us, about faith, and life.

We are all in this boat. We are all in this storm.

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We know how the biblical story ends.

We don't know how our story ends. And Rembrandt does this beautiful thing for us freezing the scene with himself, and us, in this moment that seems to define the essence of what it is to be human.

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I wish I could tell you to go see this painting, but I can't.

It was stolen from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in the early hours of March 18, 1990. Crudely cut from its frame. It has never been found.

I am always struck by how perfect Rembrandt's expression on the canvas was for that moment. Looking into the eyes of the thieves, in horror, and disbelief.

And how tragically fitting it is, that this picture should get tossed about itself in a storm of human drama, mystery, and uncertainty.

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There are other paintings that Rembrandt could have made of this scene.

And there are other sermons I could preach about this story. But like he did. I want to leave it here. In this place that feels raw, uneasy, but honest.

This moment where we are not really sure what will happen next.

A moment when we can just begin to peer over the blinders of our fear to remember something powerfully reassuring.

Jesus is in the boat.

