

Sermon: 4th Sunday after Epiphany

Text: Matthew 8:18-23

Theme: We are together in a boat = the church

Goal: To highlight the fragility of our life and of our church, and that only faith in Jesus can surpass all the storms.

Dear Friends,

Introduction: *The early church theologians regularly depicted the church as a band of people who were sailing to a blessed port, with Jesus and the Holy Spirit at the tiller.* (Phil Brandt, p.59). It is not a bad image to portray the church, and this Gospel can teach us a lot about this experience.

Have you ever been in a boat on a stormy day? Maybe when you crossed to Robben Island against the wind? Lidia and I had once this experience in Brazil, and it was terrible!!! What can you do? Nothing but trust the pilot... and pray, till you reach the shore again.

I – In a boat with the disciples

It also depends if you are a tourist in a boat, or if you are a fisherman in a fishing boat, like the disciples. A tourist doesn't have any responsibility if something happens with the boat; but he will suffer the consequences as all the sailors do. But if you are a fisherman, you are co-responsible with the other fishers to manage the boat as well as you can. - Are you a tourist in the church, just seated and watching; or are you a fisher, trying to catch fish into the boat? Jesus said to the disciples: "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19).

Let us go into the boat with the disciples. It was a calm day and they were enjoying crossing the Galilee Lake. They were used to this, because they were professional fishers and they knew how

to manage the boat well. It was so calm, that Jesus even laid down and slept. But, “without warning, a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat.”

What would be your reaction as a professional fisherman? I would make every effort to join the efforts of the others to manage the boat and to save our lives. Nothing is wrong with that attitude. But the storm grew in such a way that they became desperate!

What are the storms that are bothering you? Some health issues? Maybe a cancer? Some relationship issue? Some financial issue? Doubts? – What are the storms that are affecting the church? The government is trying to dictate some rules to the church, interfering in her practice and doctrine? There is a huge competition with other churches ? Members are not committed?

Every one of us will do the best we can to surpass these problems, challenges and storms in our lives and in our church. We have free will to choose our doctor and hospital for a good treatment; we can negotiate our debts with the bank ... The church can take some proactive actions... But it will come a stage that nothing will help anymore and we will reach the edge of desperation. And Jesus, it seems that He is sleeping...

Many are the individuals and churches that teach that you have to solve your problems by yourself. It depends on your actions and on your faith (as the faith is something that we worked out...). As if it depended on our free will and attitude...

II – In the boat with Jesus

Martin Luther is drastic when he describes the situation of the Christians in the church boat: *For as soon as you commit yourself to this Lord and come with him into the ship, wind, storm, and buffeting will surely ensue...In other words, if you don't want to be God's servant, just coast along, the devil will leave you alone.*

On the other hand, if you desire to serve God and be a Christian, resign yourself willingly and say goodbye to good days, for you will not escape persecution. But don't despair. (Phil Brandt, p. 46). If you want to be a Christian, then you must expect that the wind, the sea, and storms will make mischief. To you wish to preach Christ and acknowledge the faith? Then expect the world to turn ugly. (p. 47).

Prosperity, good health and wealth are not assured conditions or blessings for a Christian. The church history and the apostles show us just the opposite. If we have these blessings, like Abraham, David, Solomon and others had, we shall praise the Lord and acknowledge that all we have belongs to Him and we are mere managers of His gifts. But if we don't have everything we want, we need to be aware that God is testing us to strengthen our faith. Luther wrote: *Jesus will be sleeping in the back of the boat. It will appear that God does not care. He will feel distant, inattentive, and insensitive to our fear and terror. That is normal. Don't believe it, but it is normal. God is building faith and he does not build faith by never testing us. Boot camp is not about making new soldiers feel good about themselves. It is about pushing and pushing them, so they will know what they can do. God likewise exercises us, allows calamities and terrors to descend upon us. The goal of all this is to get us to give up on ourselves and turn to him. (Phil, p. 60).*

III – “You of little faith”

How big is your faith? Can you measure or weight it? Some people are proud of their faith, and they boast with it. No; this is arrogance, not faith. It doesn't depend on how big your faith is; it depends on if you have faith and trust in Jesus, or if you don't trust Him in every situation of your life. The disciples, after having tried to do whatever they could, in desperation they went

to Jesus and “woke Him, saying, ‘Lord, save us! We are going to drown!’” Before calming the storm, Jesus replied to them: “You of little faith, why are you so afraid? Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm.”

Their faith was little, but they had faith to come to Jesus and to ask for help. I will say again: It doesn't depend on how big your faith is; it depends on if you have faith and trust in Jesus, or if you don't trust Him in every situation of your life. And He will have a solution. Maybe not as we are expecting it, but as He means the best for us. Sometimes the solution will be even death; because then we will be delivered from all pain and enter the eternal rest with God and all the saints and angels. God knows what the best for us is. We have to trust.

Conclusion: Luther: *This, then, is a most wonderful lesson for those who earnestly desire to be Christians. From it we should learn that when storms rage, Christ will not only be there ready to help us, but great blessing and glorious fruit will also result. That has been so for us, and from personal experience we have learned the power and virtue of the word and faith. Psalm 50:15 states, “Call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me,” and Psalm 91:15, “He shall call upon me, and I will answer him: I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him, and honor him.” If you wish to be a Christian, you will certainly experience trials. However, if you call upon Christ in time of need, he will hear you, rescue you, and cause your trial to bear blessed fruit and great glory. For the present every necessity is met; and later, eternal life will follow... time of need must always come first, then follows rescue and glory. - Dear Father in heaven, grant this to all of us for Christ's sake, through his Holy Spirit. Amen. (Phil Brandt, p.1).*