

# Calming of the Storm

Fred O'Brien

Mark 4:35-41 and Matthew 8:23-27

*“When it is evening, you say,*

*‘It will be fair weather; for the sky is red.’*

*And in the morning,*

*‘It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.’*

*You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky,*

*but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.*      Matthew 16:2-3

## Introduction



My interest in the sea goes back to my early childhood and has grown ever since. My father introduced us (my seven brothers, six sisters and I) as children to swimming off the West Coast of Ireland. From our early childhood we spent time each summer at the seaside resort of Kilkee in west Clare. My older brother, John, and I joined the Shannon Swimming Club in Limerick City and we competed at swimming galas on rivers, lakes and in the open sea at venues in the province of Munster. During our time at Kilkee each year, in addition to swimming at various places in and around the bay, we went for walks along the cliffs, rocks and coastline with my parents and maternal grandparents. On family walks during the day or night we stopped off at various natural amphitheatre shaped rock formations and engaged in story telling, praying the family rosary, singing and delighting in the panoramic view of the sometimes turbulent and, at other times, calm sea. We became familiar with the moods of the sea, the changing tide times, and the best swimming and diving spots. I can say with St. Augustine (Bk XXII, Ch XXIV; p. 395) that I saw “the strange alterations in the colour of the sea (as though in several garments), now one green, then another, now blue, then purple – how pleasing a sight sometimes it is to see it rough, and how much more pleasing when it is calm!

Our enjoyment of life by the seaside occurred in a faith context. Participation at daily mass and recitation of the family rosary was normal for us. My father’s favourite bible story was the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, and he and my mother encouraged within their children a firm faith that God always provides for one’s needs. With my experience of swimming in all kinds of weather, in rough and calm seas and having traveled with local fishermen in their lightweight canvas lined currachs, the story of the calming of the storm held a particular fascination for me. A heightened interest occurred when I read the autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux where the storm story is mentioned in several contexts (e.g. pps 109, 111, 165) and where her concern that “rarely souls allow Him to sleep peacefully within them. Jesus is fatigued with always having to take the initiative and to attend to others that he hastens to take advantage of the repose I offer him (p.165)” (p.165)

#### Experiencing the Storm

The account of the storm in Matthew and Mark became very real for me in June of 1997 when, with Karl Dittmar, I took part in the Dyea (near Skagway), Alaska to Dawson, Yukon Centennial Race to the Klondike. The race was limited to 50 teams of two, and was a re-enactment of the great gold-rush stampede of 1897-98. We had a 56 Kl. hike over the Chilkoot trail and a 900 Kl. canoe trip from Bennet Lake, through several lakes and down the mighty Yukon river to Dawson city. We each had to carry a minimum load of 22.5 Kilograms (50 lbs), which included listed compulsory items such as a gold pan, cast iron frying pan, hatchet, shovel, flour, beans and dried fruit - all to make it a realistic commemoration of the stampede.

The canoeing was an unexpected adventure. While sails were not allowed I had occasion to use a golfing umbrella on Bennet Lake; and more importantly, on Windy Arm (another large lake) during a storm of biblical proportions! One team sank in the storm, had to be rescued and nearly were lost, suffering hypothermia. Having lost most of their gear and not in a position to continue, they scratched from the race. All the other competitors, except Karl and I, stayed ashore until the storm abated! We were traveling close to shore, Karl in the rear and I up front. With the wind picking up I opened the umbrella and we started to pick up good speed. I was happy to display the umbrella to all those stampeders on shore, gesturing to them, bravado style, that we would see them in Dawson!! Being close to shore I felt that the breaking waves in the shallows were treacherous and I suggested to Karl that we move out a little farther into the lake. To my surprise, Karl turned to cross the lake, using his paddle as a rudder. The storm increased in ferocity. The sky darkened and, with the increased wind speed and gusts, the umbrella was blown inside-out some seven times. With the sudden pulls and thrusts things got very unsteady in the canoe and I started to fear for Karl and for the circumstances of my own family in the event of a looming disaster. I managed to brace myself, with my two knees against the gunnels, and to hold the stem of the umbrella in my left hand and the sky-pointing rib in my right hand so as to continue catching the wind and remaining relatively steady.



*Reach for the skies, up she goes!  
With gusto in it, beauty shows.  
Stretch the boundaries, barriers break.  
Shoot for heaven, shackles shake.  
Back flip, pike, somersault,  
Hand stand, inward, swallow.  
Take the board and shoot aloft,  
Faith will bring the morrow. Fred O'Brien*

The waves had increased up to some seven feet in height, according to Karl. We were trying to reach the narrows to Tagish River and had to cut across the wind and were buffeted by gusts and waves on the right side of the canoe. Every time we got a blast of wind and wave I called out (not too loud) "Jesus" in prayer. I recalled St. Therese of Lisieux's reflection on the Bible story of Jesus asleep in the boat during the storm where she indicated that she would not wake him. I resolved to take her advice and prayed for Karl, myself, our families and put my trust in God. The wind was so powerful that we were shooting across the lake and over the waves at great speed. Without the umbrella, I am sure, we would have sunk in the storm! Karl was using the paddle as a rudder and I was constricting the shape of the umbrella to hold it intact, bag shaped, and capturing the wind. The sky was ominously dark, the far shore seemed to be receding and the journey seemed to take an eternity. Now and again I thought: *how far could we swim if we went down? How cold is the water?* The situation was so serious, I thought, that, come what may, even though my knees and arms were rigid and tired, I would not flag in my efforts and determination. I believe I was not afraid for myself. Karl had nerves of steel in the rear of the canoe and, with his steady hand, solid sense of humour in the face of challenge, and, aided by the prayers of our Maryhouse supporters in Whitehorse, we did not take a drop of water in the course of the crossing!! On arrival at the other side the storm was still at its height and we had to beach the canoe with the lashing waves and gusting windblasts hitting us from the right. As we approached the shore I leapt from the canoe, was sideswiped by it in the shallow water and fell. The canoe was swamped and Karl and I were totally immersed in the freezing water. We struggled with the canoe and, managed to drag everything ashore. We were famished and proceeded to transfer canoe, tent and gear out of the wind-swept open area and around the corner of the sheltered narrows. We gathered firewood, found dry matches and tinder and lit a blazing fire. We pitched tent, stripped out of our wet clothes and hung clothing and gear to dry on some beach-lain deadwood. Our sleeping bags were dry on the inside and we bedded down for the night. It was the most incredible adventure I had ever experienced. Praise the Lord for delivering us safely from so great a storm!

### **Nature Symbols of God's Deeds of Power**

*"From the fig tree learn its lesson:*

*As soon as its branch becomes tender*

*and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near."* Mark 13:28

*"The vine tendrils fear not...a storm driven down the sky*

*by mighty blasts of the North, but thrust forth their buds*

*and unfold all their leaves."* Virgil: Georgics Book 2 [alignment]

Raymond Brown (133), referring to the miraculous actions of Jesus in chapters 4 and 5 of Mark's Gospel, reminds us that the 1<sup>st</sup>-century worldview was very different from our own. He is correct of course. And yet the saying "the more things change, the more they remain the same" has a great deal of truth to it. Human nature does not change and the search for meaning continues. In chapter five of the book, *Knowledge and Faith*, Edith Stein treats of the symbolic theology of Dionysius the Areopagite. Scholars stress, she tells us, that for the Areopagite, 'theology' "means Holy Scripture, 'God's Word,' and 'theologians' means its authors, the sacred writers."(87). While, she tells us, this view usually holds, she indicates that "it does not seem to me to exhaust their meaning" (87).

Through those to whom he speaks on the mountaintop God wishes to speak to the people they left below. That is why he deigns to speak to them, through them, and even without their mediation, in human words and in images men can understand. God gives his theologians the words and images that enable them to speak of him to others. And to those others he speaks as a "symbolic theologian" – through nature, through their inner experience and through His traces in human life and world history – thereby enabling them to understand the language of the theologians. (Stein 117)

The Spirit is active in the writing of the biblical text, and, indeed, in directing human consciousness towards the Triune God by displays of beauty and grandeur in creation.

"Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made" (Romans 1:20).

As to the reading of scripture, Collins notes that: "inspiration is predicated of the biblical text precisely because there is a faith community who, under the influence of the Spirit, will read and identify with this biblical text" (1033).

### Interpreting the Sea

Reality reveals itself to our apprehensive faculties in many and mysterious ways. Words can have personal, cultural, national and global impacts in terms images brought to mind. The images conjured up can extend through the centuries. "Remember Thermopylae!" has meaning to this day. Military strategists, diplomats and anyone facing a major challenge find this expression, which refers to the heroic three-day delaying-action in 480 BC fought by 300 Spartans along with 7,000 other Greeks against some 200,000 Persians at the Pass of Thermopylae (Herodotus, VII, 176).

The story is recounted in the epic novel, *Gates of Fire* (Doubleday), by Stephen Pressfield published, in 1998.

I still recall translating the Greek words “?alassa, ?alassa” as our high-school class completed Xenophon’s *Anabasis* in 1958! “The sea, the sea” the small number of survivors of the defeated ten thousand Greek mercenaries cried, when, after a long and arduous march, including encounters with Persian forces and armed local populations, they reached the Black sea coast. Their enthusiasm, I am sure, resonated in my very being as I read the words!

Sea stories in the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament form an important part of the story of a faith people and provide a backdrop to the calming of the storm story. Here are some examples:

Psalm 29:3      The voice of the Lord is over the waters.

Ps65:7-8      You silence the roaring of the seas, the roaring of the waves, the tumult of the peoples.

Ps.89:9                      You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them.

Ps.93:4                      More majestic than the thunders of the mighty waters, more majestic than the

waves of the sea, majestic on high is the Lord!

Ps 107:25-30      For he commanded and raised the stormy wind,

which lifted up the waves of the sea.

They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths;

Their courage melted away in their calamity;

they reeled and staggered like drunkards, and were at their wits’ end.

Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,

and he brought them out from their distress;

he made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed.

Then they were glad because they had quiet,

And he brought them to their desired haven.

Job 38:8-9 ...who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb? – when I made the clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band.

Isaiah 57:20 ... the wicked are like the tossing sea.

Jonah 1:4 But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god.

1:5 Jonah, meanwhile... had lain down and was fast asleep.

2.2 I called to the Lord out of my distress and he answered me.

Nahum 1:3a-4a His way is in a whirlwind and storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet. He

rebukes the sea and makes it dry, and he dries up all the rivers.

Matthew and Mark were fully aware of Israel's history when they wrote their Gospels. God's covenant with Noah after the saving of humankind and the account of the Exodus were very familiar to them. Saving by water and sea was their cultural and religious context. As religious Jews they would have been familiar with the Hebrew Bible, including the various references to God's awesome power contained in the selected excerpts above. In framing their account they were conscious of their audiences. Whether it was the Greeks, Romans or other Gentiles (particularly for Mark) who had a background culture of exposure to certain theogenies, philosophies and traditional religions; or Jewish communities (primarily for Matthew), one can observe in the Gospel accounts that words, descriptions and images used were skillfully crafted with the hearer in mind.

Speaking of what is possible "in the light of faith", Edith Stein writes that "a word of Scripture may so touch me in my innermost being that in this word I feel God himself speaking to me and sense his presence. The book and the sacred writer, or the preacher that I was just hearing, have vanished – God *himself* is *speaking*, and he is speaking to *me*. At the time, the ground of faith is not exactly left behind, but for the moment I am raised above it to the experiential knowledge of

God” (110). Again, Edith Stein writes: “The person who knows and loves God from and in his living faith will be eager to come to know him from ever changing perspectives and in new ‘features,’ and again and again he will turn to the Holy Scriptures that makes it possible” (109).

### The Wind and the Sea

The words used to describe the storm by Matthew, Mark and Luke were utilized in a ‘Storm-wave Hindcasting’ study in Ocean Engineering and the findings displayed.

Looking at storm designations in the English, German and Norwegian language, making certain assumptions, using physics and applied mathematics, and translating the results into the Beaufort scale, the results were as follows:

Ref.	Designation	Beaufort scale
Matthew & Luke	Strong gale	9
Mark	Storm	10

The Beaufort scale runs from 0 = Calm to 12 = Hurricane

From my reading of the case study, in which wave heights were calculated using wind calculations and other criteria, a wave height maximum was calculated as 1.8 metres. (this interpretation of the case may be faulty on my part!)



Bk.	English	German	Norwegian	Greek	Ref.
0	Calm	Sill	Sille	Γαλήνη μεγάλη	
1	Light air	leichter Zug	flau vind	Αἶθρα λεπτή	
2	Light breeze	leichte Brise	svak vind	Αἶθρα	
3	Gentle breeze	Schwache Brise	lett bris	Πνεύμα	
4	Moderate breeze	Mittige Brise	lukket bris	-	
5	Fresh breeze	Frische Brise	frisk bris	Πνεύμα μέγα	
6	Strong breeze	Starker Wind	stærk blæs	Άνεμος μέγας	
7	Near gale	Starker Wind	stærk blæs	Άνεμος σκληρός	
8	Gale	Stürmischer Wind	stærk blæs	Άνεμος σκληρός	
9	Strong gale	Sturm	full storm	Αἰόλας ἐπίφορος Σεπταμος μέγας	Luke Matthew
10	Storm	Schwerer Sturm	full storm	Αἰόλας μεγάλη ἐπίφορος	Mark
11	Violent storm	Orkansturm	full storm	Άνεμος τροφαντός	
12	Hurricane	Orkan	Orkan	Ὄρηον θύελλα	

Using Liddell the following meanings of the terms used by the evangelists were found:

Looking at reality we could compare the mathematical and poetic modes of explanation of the generation of waves by wind and consider to what extent they describe and explain the phenomena.

**Poetic:**                    There are waters blown by changing winds to laughter

And lit by the rich skies all day. And after,

Frost with a gesture, stays the waves that dance

And wandering loveliness. He leaves a white

Unbroken glory, a gathered radiance,

A width, a shining peace, under the night. **Charles Lamb**

Poetry, mathematical models and prose are used to describe the natural environment and their modes of explanation have value and limitation. Their comparative merits in representing reality and imparting knowledge is of epistemological significance. Mathematics works, it is objective, manageable and certain. Poetry has both an emotional and intellectual appeal; it induces wonder, which is an incentive towards effort at further understanding those less codifiable aspects of reality highlighted in the poet's imagery. The following treatments of the sea environment can give one a feel for "story" styles:

*Roll on, thou deep and dark blue Ocean - roll;  
Ten thousand fleets sweep over thee in vain;  
Man marks the earth with ruin - his control  
Stops with the shore - upon the watery plain  
The wrecks are all thy deed, nor doth remain  
A shadow of man's ravage, save his own,  
When, for a moment, like a drop of rain,  
He sinks into thy depths with bubbling groan,  
Without a grave, unknell'd, uncoffin'd and unknown. – Lord Byron.*

**“There is, one knows not what sweet mystery about this sea,**

**whose gently awful stirrings seem to speak of some hidden soul beneath.”**

**Herman Melville, Moby-Dick**

**“The regularity of the barrels [waves] surprised and charmed the eye;  
the edge behind the comb or crest was as smooth and bright as glass.”**

Gerard Manley Hopkins, Journal 1872

### Faith and the Storm Story

“For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.” Matt 17:20

The storm described by Mark is more ferocious than that described by Matthew while the reprimand by Jesus in Mark - “Have you no faith” – is more serious than “you of little faith” in Matthew. Mark has, accordingly, emphasized the greatness of the deed of power performed by Jesus (stilling a ‘seismic’ storm) and the great lack of faith in his followers. This is in keeping with his strong emphasis on the total rejection of the Messiah by all, and, in the light of the resurrection and the conversion of the disciples, the great hope offered to the audience, people of little power and subject to persecution, he was speaking to. The contrast between Mark and Matthew can even be seen as greater when one considers that, prior to the calming the disciples were privy to the musthion (“To you has been given the secret of the Kingdom of God”) (4:11) and that Jesus “explained everything (panta) in private to them (4:34).

### Conclusion

"One sins against the Majesty of God if one refuses to look at nature's own work and if one is content with merely reading what someone else has written about it. That is the way to conjure up for oneself different fanciful opinions. It means not only missing the joy of beholding God's marvels, but also wasting time which could have been used for something useful and to the benefit of one's neighbour, by lapsing into all sorts of things which are unworthy of God." (Palsson 17)

The “Calming of the Sea” story is a wonderful story of the great power of God and of how he speaks to us in an environmental adventure trip. For the story to impact one's heart and mind it is necessary to be graced by faith and moved by the ‘meaningful’ symbols. I have heard it said that for some people water is no longer the sign indicating being buried with Christ and rising with him that it was in times past. Experiencing water only from a tap, which can be turned on and off at will, and seeing it as something controlled by engineered dams, cisterns and canals and apparently fully under human control is not a reflection of its contingent being that speaks of the Creator. The disciples were very close to God's creation and filled with the Spirit of Jesus. For people to more fully hear the ‘theologians’ spoken of by the Areopagite they must meaningfully experience God's creation.

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