

Lent in Art

A Visual Devotional

Rembrandt

Storm on the Sea of Galilee



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Instructions

Day 1

1. Read Mark 4:35-41 and compare the account with the painting.
2. Read the section above entitled “The Reading.” This will help you gain insight into the characters on the boat and the scene.
3. Read “The Contemplation” section entitled “A Great Storm.”
4. Rembrandt painted himself into the piece. Begin to contemplate yourself in the boat.
5. KIDS: The following exercise will be helpful as we move into the contemplation of Day 2. Study the painting closely, then close your eyes and imagine what the scene sounded like. Don’t prompt answers too quickly, but allow children to hear the wind, the shouts, the waves. If they struggle have them look at the painting again. After imagining the sounds of the scene, move through the other physical senses in the same way...smell, taste, feel, see. Making the storm real will help children understand the sudden shift to the stillness when Christ calms the sea.

Day 2

1. Read “The Contemplation” section entitled “A Great Calm.”
2. Read Psalm 107:23-32
3. Salvation is a creation event, “you are a new Creation.” In what ways does your life need to experience a new creation movement: from chaos to order, evil to good, conflict to harmony, brokenness to wholeness?
4. KIDS: Study the painting and then imagine the stillness after Christ calms the sea. Discuss the five senses again. If they were in the boat what would they hear, taste, smell, feel on their skin etc. We want to imagine the difference between the storm and the calm.

Day 3

1. Read “The Contemplation” section entitled “A Great Fear.”
2. Read Philippians 4:4-9.
3. In your present place in life are you experiencing more chaos or more peace? If you are fearful: “cry out to the Lord in your trouble” and “let your request be made known to God.” If you are at peace – praise him and dwell on the true, honorable, right, pure, lovely...
4. KIDS: Give your kids the coloring sheet and let them color. If they want, have them paint themselves into the boat.



The Painting

(The best way to view the painting is to search for the painting online and display it on the largest screen you have with the highest resolution image you can find. Often Wikipedia will be a good source).

Rembrandt's *Storm on the Sea of Galilee* (1633) is the only seascape Rembrandt ever painted and showcases his unique talent for bringing Biblical narratives to life. Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rij is considered the most important Dutch painter in history and painted during the Dutch Golden Age.



The Reading

Rembrandt is known for his ability to reveal the inner emotional and spiritual conflicts of men by painting their outer realities. This painting is full of struggle and conflict. Light versus dark, waves versus boat, faith versus fear, all of these struggles are contained in this one work.

The scene pitches nature against human frailty – both physical and spiritual.

The moment that Rembrandt has chosen to paint is dramatic. He has chosen to present the moment Christ is awakened from sleep.

We see a large wave driving the boat up into the



air at a frightening angle, threatening to capsize at any moment. One man at the back of the boat struggles to hold the tiller to drive the boat at an angle into the wave, their only hope of staying afloat. We can see his strain and focus on staying the course.

At the bow of the boat we have five men battling with the rigging and a torn sail. Most likely these are the disciples who worked as fishermen and had some experience with the sudden storms that the Sea of Galilee was known for.

Even with experienced sailors, a torn mainsail is a disaster. The disciples have lost their ability to control how the sail will catch the wind negating much of their experience. Rembrandt has painted some of the rigging flying off into the gale with a heavy block attached. The wind has ripped the block loose and it poses an additional threat to those onboard.

Each of the men in the front of the boat is illuminated, emphasizing the contest they are waging with the winds and waves. Their focus is on using the skills they possess to guide their boat through the storm.

In the back of the boat we have more disciples, one is vomiting over the side of the boat, one gapes at the oncoming wave with horror on his face. Two kneel waking Jesus from sleep appearing angry and distressed. One disciple sits with his back to us, dressed in white with a hat upon his head. It has been suggested that this disciple has given up, accepted his fate and sits down to wait for the inevitable.

If you look closely you will see another disciple kneeling in front of Jesus with a faint halo around his head. Only this disciple and Jesus have halos, an interesting detail. Unlike the two disciples angrily waking Jesus, this disciple kneels in faith and waits for Jesus to act, his faith indicated by his halo.

Finally, we come to the fourteenth man in the boat. Normally, this scene is depicted with 13 men, Christ and the 12 disciples. Rembrandt has painted himself into the scene, holding onto a rope and staring out at the viewer seeming to invite us to place ourselves into the story.

In the midst of the chaos we have Christ, calm and seemingly unaffected by the storm raging around him. In moments we know that Jesus will command the winds and sea to 'Be still.' Interestingly, after he calms the storm the disciple's terror is now redirected to Jesus, as verse 41 tells us.

As we wrap up our examination of the paintings, I want to draw your attention to two details which give our story context and meaning. The mast of the ship forms a cross and light breaks through the clouds giving us hope that the storm will soon be over.

We are reminded that while the disciples are caught up in a very real struggle, that light and the victory of the cross have the final word.



The Contemplation

Mark 4: 35-41

35 On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." 36 And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him. 37 And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. 38 But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" 39 And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. 40 He said to them, "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?" 41 And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (Mk. 4:35-41 ESV)

The Three Greats

The story that is the basis of Rembrandt's work can be found in three gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke. We will be looking at Mark's account. All three gospels also connect this story with the Gerasene Demoniac which you can read about in Mark 5.

Note the repeated use of the word "mega," usually translated "great." It is used three times in the text: a great storm (whirlwind, hurricane) in verse 37, a great calm (a smooth surface of water) in verse 39, a great fear in verse 41. (This threefold usage is not always emphasized in our English translations, for instance the NIV translates them: "furious squall; completely calm, and terrified. For our purposes just note that the underlying Greek uses the adjective "mega" in all three instances).

Let's look at the account of the storm on the sea a little more closely.

A Great Storm

Jesus tells the disciples that he wants to go to the other side of the lake. This is not a random geographical reference. The other side, in this instance, will be Gentile territory. When Jesus and the disciples get to the other side, they encounter the Gerasene demoniac, who is under the rule and control of the devil.

As Jesus begins his journey toward the Gentiles and Gerasene demoniac a sudden storm appears, threatening to keep him from accomplishing his mission. The greatness of the storm is emblematic of the regular opposition Jesus encounters during his incarnation. Sometimes this opposition comes in the form of demonic possession, disease that needs healing, or religious people with agendas.

Each of the disciples responds to the storm in their own way: some pray, some get sick, some give up, some rouse Jesus and some struggle with the rigging. One looks at us as if assessing what we would do. Where would we find ourselves in the great storm?



The chaotic sea often represents evil which needs to be re-ordered, re-created. Jesus is often portrayed as overcoming the chaos that is the sea. Jesus comes to bring creation back to order. In the painting we have this idea made visual by the mast forming a cross over the chaos that is the sea.

In the same way, salvation itself is a re-creation, a restoration of order out of chaos.

A Great Calm

Jesus speaks to the sea as if it were alive.

And He got up and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Hush, be still." And the wind died down and it became perfectly calm (Mk. 4:39).

He uses this same rebuke in chapter 1 as he speaks to the demon possessed man: And Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be quiet, and come out of him!" (Mk. 1:25). It is the voice of the creator that brings wholeness to the creation.

The word for "calm" here is a specific term used to describe a perfectly calm body of water; "an unruffled surface on a body of water." I think of water skiers who go out early to ski on a glassy lake before the wind starts to agitate the surface.

The transformation is complete. In a moment the sea turns from turbulent to tranquil at his command.

The great storm and the great calm are emblematic of the battles we face in life and the peace Christ offers us amid the storm. If we define "spiritual battle" as anything that hinders us from accomplishing our purpose and reaching our full stature as humans, then this story encourages us to persevere and to seek the peace of Christ in the storm. It also gives us a template for what we strive to be during the storm – calm, believing, living in the peace that is to come even in the moments of turbulence.

This peace beyond comprehension is what Paul describes in Philippians 4:4-9.

A Great Fear

The disciples are obviously frightened by the storm and Jesus confronts them about their fear: "Why are you afraid?"

Isn't it obvious why the disciples are afraid? They fear the storm, the peril and loss it represents, they fear death. But the posture of Jesus is presented as "normal" in this story. Jesus asleep in the midst of the storm is the "odd" feature that the story reverses on us and portrays the disciple's "normal" behavior as out of place.

Then the text describes the disciples "great" fear in response to their newfound revelation about the one who commands the wind and the sea.



The passage does two things with the use of the word “mega.” First, the contrast between the intensity of the storm and the depth of the calm. Secondly, a progression of “fear from danger” to “fear and awe.” One is debilitating; one is great.

The disciples exemplify these two stages of fear: fear of the storm and its greatness and then their greater fear of the one who speaks to the wind and sea and demands obedience.

One way to interpret this cascading fear is to place the second fear into a different category: it is an appropriate fear that replaces a temporary fear. This fear is a recognition of Jesus authority and rule. Jesus demonstrates his authority over creation. He commands, creation obeys.

This pivot point, from fear to great fear, is faith. Here is the beginning of their faith – a recognition of the one who is greater than their greatest fear. It is reminiscent of the proverb: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”. We might have expected the third “great” to be a description of the disciple’s faith, but that faith is not yet fully formed – we will see that development as the gospels progress – but here it is just beginning and is described as a great fear.

If you want more devotional material with a Lent theme that is focused on great works of art you can go to KellyBagdanov.com where you can purchase a video Lent Devotional which includes 20 works of art and explained in video and print format.

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