

## **The Image of the Invisible God: Sovereignty**

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Luke 8:22-25

Maybe you remember, our sermon series is called The Image of the Invisible God. In this sermon series we are looking at words and actions of Jesus that show his character, and talk about the way Jesus' character ultimately shows us the face of God the Father. By watching Jesus' actions and words, we see the heart of God.

This morning we have a very familiar story. The story of Jesus calming the seas as told in Luke 8. The early church thought this was an important story. You can tell because it's told in all four Gospels. Not many stories are told in all four Gospels, but this is one of them. Which means that the gospel writers: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, all thought early Christians needed to know this story. There is something in this story we need to hear. So let's listen to Luke's version of the story and ask: what is the characteristic of Jesus in the attribute of God taught in this story? Let's read it and see what you think. Read Luke 8:22-25.

So, what attribute of God was being revealed by the actions of Jesus in the story? I realize that there's not much suspense in that question because I gave away the answer in the title of my sermon. It's sovereignty. When Jesus calms the Sea of Galilee with a word he is showing the sovereign power of God. All of Jesus' miracles show power of course, but this one in particular is meant to show the extent of his power. Let's just Bible nerd for a minute together and let me try to show you how there are hidden riches in passages that you think you know so well.

How did Jesus calm the waters, what did he do? He spoke to them, that's right. But how did he speak to them? He rebuked them. Maybe you caught that in verse 24. "He got up and he rebuked the wind and the raging water; the storm subsided and all was calm." That word rebuke is meant to make you think of the Old Testament – 2 passages in particular.

First when we see Jesus rebuke the waves we're supposed to think of Genesis 1. Genesis 1 is the story of creation. In that chapter how did God create the world. A lot of the story, especially at the beginning, involves God moving water with words. Genesis 1:2 "The Spirit of God was hovering over the waters." So there is lots of water there, and God tells the waters to move. God says, "let there be a vault between the waters to separate waters from waters." God says, "Let the water under the sky be gathered into one place and let dry ground appear." God says, "Alright waters, move over!" and then he puts land in the place where the waters used to be. In Genesis 1, God moves the water with words.

The second passage we are meant to think of is Psalm 104. Psalm 104 is a Psalm that celebrates God the Father's incredible power in creation. It gives a poetic retelling of the creation story. Listen to how the psalmist describes God moving around the water at creation: "You set the earth on its foundations; it can never be moved. You covered it with watery depths as with a garment; the water stood above the mountains. But at your rebuke the water's fled; at the sound of your thunder they took flight... They went down into the valleys into the place you assigned for them." Did you hear the key word there? At your rebuke, the waters fled.

Psalm 104 says that God created the world by rebuking the waters, by telling them where to go. And now when Jesus awakes from his sleep in the bottom of the boat what does he do? He rebukes the waters. That word was not chosen by accident. That word is sending a message to the early church, that word is sending a message to you and me. The sovereign power that created the heavens and the earth. The sovereign power that fired the sun and scattered the planets. The sovereign power that lifted mountains and carved out rivers. That sovereign power is in Jesus. That sovereign power has come to the world in Jesus and that sovereign power is in the boat with you, that sovereign power is right there in the boat with you in the middle of your storm. 'Who is this that the winds and the waves obey him?' The disciples ask at the end of the

passage, and the answer is, he is the sovereign God, he is the one in whom all things hold together and he is there in the boat with us.

It's a beautiful message, but of course that's not the tricky part of God's sovereignty. The fact that the Bible proclaims the sovereignty of God is pretty unmistakable. It's a clear teaching of Scripture. The problems with doctrine come when this clear teaching of the Bible runs into the reality of our lives.

Years ago Calvin College, published a year-long devotional where each day's devotional was written by an alum. One of the pieces was written by a middle aged woman who told the story of her daughter Kate. When her daughter was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, her teacher's brother got sick and fell into a coma. During the year the class prayed for the teacher's brother and the Bible passage they used to guide that prayer was Jeremiah 29:11 – "I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you. Plans to give you hope and a future." The teacher's brother came out of his coma and was restored to health.

The next year, Kate and her family were on a trip to Hungary. They went on a hike in the mountains, and in the middle of the hike Kate slipped and fell. She hit her head and went into a coma. Kate went to the hospital and it soon became apparent that she would not come out of her coma. The family took their 12-year-old daughter off of life support and she died. Later the Mother was cleaning out her daughter's room and taped to the mirror she found her daughter's favorite verse written out in in her daughter's handwriting, "I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you. Plans to give you hope and a future."

Tough story, right? And it's here where our understanding of God's sovereignty can hit some rough seas. If God is an all-powerful God who can heal diseases with a touch and calm storms with a word, why in heaven's name does he allow little girls to fall off of mountainsides? There is not a thoughtful Christian in this room who hasn't asked some version of this question.

The story of Jesus calming the seas is a good one for those hard questions too. Because this story doesn't just proclaim God's sovereign power; this story tells us some things about how we should expect God's sovereignty to be exercised in our life. This story suggests something about the way God administers his sovereignty in this world, and it suggests something about who God calls us to be in our storms. First, this story shows us something about how God exercises his sovereignty. This story reminds us that just because Jesus is all powerful and he's in the boat with us, that doesn't mean there won't be storms. Most of us would like a world without storms. For ourselves, for our family, for our society. That's what we pray for, right? When someone we love gets sick, or when conflict comes to our family we pray, 'Lord please make this stop.' And that's fine, of course.

But this book shows us that God's path of salvation leads through the storm. From the beginning, God has chosen to take the long path through the storm. Here's what I mean: at creation, when human beings fell into sin, God could have chosen to fix things with a word. He's sovereign after all, presumably he could have redeemed it all with a word. But he didn't. He chose the long road, the hard road of redemption instead of the instant fix. Jesus made the same choice; at the beginning of his ministry the devil said to him, bow down to me and you can have all the nations of the world. Instant authority. But Jesus says no and chooses the long road of redemption.

When Jesus chose the means to defeat the devil, the sovereign God who could have destroyed the devil with one short word of rebuke. But instead, he chose to exercise his sovereignty and defeat the devil by hanging on a cross. That is such an important fact. If we want to understand the doctrine of God's sovereignty as it is experienced in our lives, we must, we must, we must look at his sovereignty through the cross. When you do you can see that God has chosen to exercise his sovereignty not through the instant power of brute force, but through the slower power of suffering love. To put this in terms that apply to your life: Yes, God is sovereign and has the power to remove my storm with a word, but most of the time he calls us to face the storm and go all the way through it.

Second, this story suggests something about how God would have us carry ourselves in the storm. After Jesus wakes up and calms the storm he rebukes the disciples. "Where is your faith?" he asks them. That suggests that Jesus doesn't completely approve of the way they reacted in the situation. When Jesus says

‘Where is your faith?’ that suggests he wishes they’d behaved differently in the boat, right? Which begs the question: what would Jesus have counted as a faithful reaction in that situation? Because honestly, crying out for Jesus for help seems like a pretty normal reaction. It’s what I would probably do. But Jesus says, “Where is your faith?” Sovereign Lord, what would you have us do in that situation?

As I wrestled with that question this week, I found myself thinking about the state of the church at the time Luke was writing his gospel. Most people think Luke’s gospel was written in the 70-80 AD range. A few people have it as early as 65. For any of those dates, the church would have been in a stormy season. Paul and Peter, the two great titans of the church, had just been executed by the empire; Paul by beheading, Peter by crucifixion. The church had just been through Nero’s persecution and, in general, there was lots of opposition. These were stormy times and for the vast majority of those Christians, there was no miraculous deliverance. In fact, of the 12 men who were in the boat with Jesus and who were delivered by Jesus’ word of Sovereign power, tradition tells us that 10 of them were martyred for their faith. Eventually, from the perspective of this life and this world, all of them went down in the storm.

But in the middle of the storm, instead of panicking like they do in our passage, they are faithful. They pick up their cross and follow. They go through the storm and as they do they love each other, they care for each other, they worship Jesus, they preach the gospel, they care for the poor and the sick in their communities in ways that astonish their pagan neighbors, they endure ridicule anger abuse and they return it with love and joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

And that’s the faith Jesus is looking for in the storm. When we have to go through one of life’s storms, it is natural that we will feel afraid, but as people of faith, Jesus hopes that in the face of the storm and the fear will also be people of faith and hope and especially love. And we will be that kind of people because we know that whether we stay afloat or whether we sink to the bottom and the thing we most fear happens, Jesus will be with us and we will be in his strong and sovereign hands.

Of course, sometimes God does do a miracle for us. Sometimes he suddenly calms the sea, sometimes he suddenly heals the disease, suddenly takes away the pain. Those miracles show God’s sovereign power, but they do not show the way God will exercise his sovereign power in our lives. Those miracles are meant to give us hope and courage when we are called to travel all the way through the storm.

Richard John Neuhaus, the great Catholic thinker and good Christian man, died of cancer in 2009. It was not his first brush with the disease. 16 years earlier he’d been very sick with Colon cancer. He’d had major surgery to remove part of his Colon and as he lay in his hospital room halfway between life and death he saw something in his room. Here’s how he described it. “What I was staring at was a color like blue and purple, and vaguely in the form of hanging drapery. By the drapery were two “presences.” And then the presences, one or both of them, I do not know, spoke. This I heard clearly. Not in an ordinary way, for I cannot remember anything about the voice. But the message was beyond mistaking: “Everything is ready now.” That was it. They waited for a while, maybe for a minute. Whether they were waiting for a response or just waiting to see whether I had received the message, I don’t know. “Everything is ready now.” It was not in the form of a command, nor was it an invitation to do anything. They were just letting me know.”

Neuhaus was a smart man and he knew that the further you get removed from experiences like this, the more you tend to doubt what you saw so he made a deal with himself: he was not going to let that happen. He made a mental note to himself to remind himself that this was not a figment of his imagination, this was not something he ate; this was real. This was like his miracle, his calming of the seas. What did this do for the rest of his life? He lived the next 16 years of his life with more confidence, more hope, more peace, more love. When new storms came, he had a deeper confidence that a sovereign God would work all things for good, no matter what happened to him. “Be assured that I neither fear to die nor refuse to live. If it is to die, all that has been is but a slight intimation of what is to be. If it is to live, there is much I hope to do in the interim.” It didn’t make him expect that all the rest of his problems would be met by miracles; it gave him the ability to face the storms with grace.

But I've never seen a vision like that or heard a voice tell me, 'everything is ready now.' But you've heard Jesus on the cross say, "It is finished." And you've seen the risen Jesus say "All Authority in heaven on earth has been given to me." You have been given these firm and certain signs of his sovereign power.

That was enough to carry Kate's Mom. After the tragedy of her loss, she kept hoping in the midst of her storm. "I rest in God's plans. His plans are higher than mine. I trust him even though I don't understand him." May God give all of us strength to live with hope in the midst of our storms.

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