

Proper 7B 2018 Sermon

June 24, 2018

Mark 4:35-41 *When evening had come, Jesus said to his disciples, "Let us go across to the other side. "And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith? "And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"*

I suspect that every young child has nightmares from time to time. I know **I** did when I was young. The fear would not leave until my mother came, put her arms around me, and said, "Everything's all right. There's nothing to be afraid of."

In today's Gospel passage, it is Jesus who is **peacefully** *asleep* in the boat, and his **disciples** who are living through a wide-awake nightmare. Now, we know that *four* of Jesus' disciples are experienced fishermen. They've been on this sea countless times, and undoubtedly have encountered bad storms before. But this one seems unusually fierce. Mark tells us, "A **great** windstorm arose [the New Testament Greek word is "mega" – it was a **mega** windstorm], and the waves **beat** into the boat, so that the boat was already being **swamped**." The disciples awaken Jesus and say to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

Jesus awakes and *rebukes* the wind and says to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" And in response to Jesus' words, "the wind ceased, and there was [in the Greek text] a **mega** calm."

Then Jesus turns to his disciples and asks, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

Note that Jesus does **not** say, as my mother did in response to my nightmares, "There's nothing to be afraid of." These experienced fishermen knew the difference between a storm that was *fierce* and a storm that was *life-threatening*; and this **mega** storm was **deadly**. So if Jesus is *not* saying, "There's nothing to be afraid of," what does he **mean** when he says, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

Lutheran pastor and bestselling author Nadia Bolz-Weber has an insight into Jesus' words that I find compelling. She first notes that we human beings evolved to have a brain that responds *instinctively* to danger. "If [the disciples] were freaking out," she writes, "it was not due to neuroses or an anxiety disorder: their boat was about to sink. As human beings we are wired for certain responses when

our lives are in danger. Adrenalin is released... our heart rate increases... and we become hyperaware of what's happening around us...

“Is [Jesus] really saying that if we have enough faith we can somehow transcend our animal brain chemistry? *Maybe* when Jesus asked, ‘Where is your faith?’ he said it not as **accusation** but as *invitation*—not a rhetorical question but an invitation to reflect on where God is in the midst of storms. Is God [closely present with us? Or is God so transcendent that he is aloof from our mundane lives]? *Maybe* [Jesus] was inviting the disciples to reflect on what it means to be alive on the other side of a situation they thought would kill them. For **us**, that situation might be a divorce, an illness, the death of a parent or even a child, the loss of a job, depression... It can *feel* as if it's going to kill us.

“Maybe, if we survive the situation, we are being encouraged to ask questions. Where was my faith? Where was God? What did I fear?...

“So here's the thing,” Pastor Bolz-Weber concludes: “I have a goal. You know how you'll be in a personal storm and you think, ‘I'm *perishing* here, God,’ but when you look back on it six months later you are still alive and the world didn't end? One day I want to get to the point where I can trust God *in the moment* and not just in retrospect months or even years later.”¹

To trust God *in the moment* and not just in retrospect months or even years later. I believe that **this** is what Jesus wants to teach his disciples – *and* all of us: to trust God in the very midst of life's storms.

Two Sundays ago, we read the story about Jesus' mother and siblings thinking he was out of his mind. In my sermon that day, I suggested that his mother and siblings had their “centers” in the consciousness of their culture. They, like most of *us*, had centered their lives around what *other* people said was normal and acceptable. Their centers were “out there” in the world, **not** in God, who abides in our soul. In my sermon, I said, “*where* our **center** is makes all the difference in the world. For it is from that center that we draw our energies, our motivations, our actions, our judgments, our attitudes toward the world and the people in it.”

Perhaps Jesus' implied question in today's Gospel, “Where is your faith?,” is an invitation to examine where our center is when we confront life's storms. Are we centered in God? Or is our center somewhere “out there,” in the world and its culture and thinking, susceptible to being swamped by every storm that life brings?

In rebuking the wind and saying to the sea, “Peace! Be still!,” Jesus is speaking an authoritative word from **his** center in God. And it makes all the difference: his words transform the situation from mega *fear* to mega *calm*.

We, too, can have trust, peace, and stillness at our center. But it won't come without a prayerful opening of our hearts and souls to the indwelling of the Holy

Spirit. It won't happen without a disciplined life of daily prayer such as Centering Prayer or some other form of contemplative practice which centers our consciousness in God. If you do not already have a regular practice of prayer, I strongly encourage you to *find* a practice that works for you – even if it's only 2 minutes a day. If you want to know where to start, ask me, or Bryan, or pb, or Linda or Mike Smith. The Episcopal Church has published a wonderful, short guide to spiritual practices titled “Strength for the Journey”² that might be helpful. You're welcome to borrow my coffee-stained copy.

But there is **more** that needs to be said about today's Gospel story. For the story began with Jesus saying to his disciples, “Let us go across to the *other* side.” And what is on the *other* side of the Sea of Galilee? The land of the Gentiles. Foreigners, who worshiped pagan Gods. According to Jewish law, Gentiles, and Gentile territory, were to be avoided. Yet Jesus wants to bring God's life and love and grace to *these* children of God, also – and he wants his disciples to do the same. So he brings them with him to “the **other** side,” crossing that invisible but socially and religiously firm boundary between “us” and “them.”

And I wonder: Is it this very boundary-crossing that occasions the mega-storm in today's Gospel? Is this night-time tempest a metaphor for the powerful, clashing resistance that Jesus' expansive message of love and forgiveness has already fomented in his family, his culture, and the leaders of his religion? We read in our Gospel two weeks ago that Jesus' family wanted to *restrain* him (Mark 3:21), and *three* weeks ago, we read that the Jewish religious and political leaders were plotting to *destroy* him (Mark 3:6)! Why? Because he healed people on the Sabbath, crossing the boundaries of the Jewish religious Law; he dared to dine with tax collectors and sinners, crossing the “us-vs.-them” boundaries of both his culture and religion; and he dared to break open the sacrosanct boundaries of “family,” saying, “Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” (Mark 3:35)

My friends, I am persuaded that in telling this story of the mega-storm occasioned by “crossing over to the **other** side,” Mark is not simply relating an event that took place at some moment in time 2000 years ago; his story has much *deeper*, symbolic meaning. For you and I are likely to encounter “storms” of one sort or another every time **we** “cross over to the **other** side.” Every time we cross the boundaries of “family” or what constitutes our “in-group” – whether that group be defined by race, socio-economic class, nationality, ethnicity, political party, religion, sexual identity or whatever – we are likely to encounter storms when we cross those boundaries. Every time we put God's love and compassion above the boundaries of the law – be it Sabbath law or immigration law or whatever – we will experience storms; sometimes even *mega*-storms.

My friends, if we are Christians, which is to say, if we are in the boat with Jesus, going where he goes, we **will** cross boundaries and encounter storms. The question is: Do we react to those storms with fear, or with faith? It all depends on

where our “center” is. Oh, we may not be able to stop the raging of the storm *without*, like Jesus did; but *within* we will have centered our own spirits in his mega-calm. In John’s Gospel, after his Last Supper with his disciples, Jesus gives them some final instructions and then says, “I have told you all these things so that you may have peace in me. In the world you will have storms, but be courageous: I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33)

James Cleveland, the first Gospel singer to earn a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, wrote a song using the imagery of today’s Gospel passage. Let me close with a quote from that song:

Whether the wrath of the storm-tossed sea
 Or demons or men or whatever it be
 No water can swallow the ship where lies
 The Master of ocean and earth and skies
 They shall sweetly obey my will
 Peace be still, peace be still
 They all shall sweetly obey my will, peace, peace be still ³

AMEN

1 *The Christian Century*, June 13, 2012 issue,
<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2012-05/sunday-june-24-2012>

2 https://www.amazon.com/Strength-Journey-Guide-Spiritual-Practice/dp/0819227463/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1530468877&sr=8-1&keywords=strength+for+the+journey+renee+miller

3 <https://genius.com/James-cleveland-peace-be-still-lyrics>