

Pastor's Message – 6/13/2021
Mark 4:35-41

In our Bible reading today, Mark presents a familiar story-- the calming of the storm on the Sea of Galilee.

It is suggested that nearly every film made about Jesus includes this scene as a defining moment. So do the three synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

The geography of the Sea of Galilee makes it especially susceptible to sudden violent storms. This is part of the reason that the gospels generally describe Jesus and the disciples sailing more or less along the shoreline rather than directly across the open body of the sea. If you were closer in, you could make a tack for the shore and ride out a sudden storm with minimal damage.

But in this story, Jesus says, "Let's set out for the opposite shore." That meant sailing directly across the sea. And worse, it was getting dark, which meant the temperatures were more unstable. That a storm would suddenly arise on this sea under these conditions is unremarkable. What is remarkable is that Jesus would lead his ship and the others with them to cross this sea at this hour. He had to have known he was possibly leading them into serious danger. Meanwhile, he went to sleep on a pillow, leaving the disciples to face the violent storm on the open sea.

The temptation for preachers is to interpret this passage to be about our need to have faith, that if only we have enough faith, God will carry us safely through the storms of our lives. There is some truth in that. However, that is too easy an answer to the questions raised by this passage. I do believe that God loves us and watches over us and wants to protect us. I believe that God wants the best for us and works for good in the world. As Jeremiah 29:11 says, "[For] I know the plans I have for you," says the LORD. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.

But the fact of the matter is, the storms still come. Good people get sick and die. Families fall apart. People wage war on one another. Disasters like tornadoes and earthquakes and hurricanes and tsunamis and floods come out of nowhere and wipe out thousands of lives in an instant.

Where is God when those storms come? Why doesn't God protect good Christian believers from disaster? Is it really because we harbored a doubt or felt afraid? Who among us has never asked, "Does God care about us? Does he hear our prayers?"

When we find ourselves in a whirlpool of angry co-workers, everyone blaming each other for some failure that is certain to cost a good deal of money lost, do we join in the finger-pointing, hoping to deflect the blame onto anyone but ourselves? When we've been fired, unemployed for over a year; down to eating canned tuna on saltines every other night and ramen noodles every lunch, don't we ask God "Don't you *care* that I have no insurance, that if I get really sick I'll have to throw myself on the mercy of some clinic?" "Don't you care that in another month the utility company will turn off my power?" "Don't you care, God, that people are dying every day of diseases that we have cures for, but they can't afford the medicine?" Or maybe we're so down in the dumps that we *can't* care about other people's kids. Maybe it's all we can do to put one foot in front of another; maybe we haven't left the house in days, too tired

to get dressed, too sad to care about food. We live in a world where the prayers of millions rise to heaven daily, crying out for strength to make it through another day.

It is in those situations that it seems that no one cares, not even God, and we are left alone to our own devices and that there is no help to be found and no end in sight. If Jesus is even there, He's asleep in the back of the boat, and it's all up to us. Who's going to trust a God like that?

Last week, I talked about what it means to be a disciple and a child of God and that those who do the will of God are Jesus' mother and brothers and sisters. You might remember that Jesus was under attack from the Pharisees who accused Him of being possessed by the devil. His own family had come to take Him away because they thought He was crazy. His own mother and brothers had come to the house where He was staying but, because of the press of people, could not get at Jesus; so they sent word in that they wanted to see Him, to take Him home, but He refused. It is at the end of that day that this passage occurs.

You can imagine that Jesus was exhausted, body and soul. Anyone who has spent time in a crowd that is demanding for any length of time knows how tiring that is. Most of us who preach are tired by the end of a single service, and many have to preach two or three times a Sunday morning. And Jesus was healing those who were brought to Him as well, which takes its own toll on the healer. So, when He says, "Let's get in the boat and get out of here," His disciples have to help Him into the boat "just as He was" -- meaning what? That He was sweating, hungry, without a coat on a sea where storms can come up quickly and violently? Probably all of that.

Furthermore, the disciples had been there when He was being criticized by family and the authorities even as He was pouring Himself out for the sick and crippled. They had been there as He told one parable after another, teaching all day and into the evening. They may have begun to wonder themselves if they were following a madman. Who really is this man that they have been following? Could the Pharisees be right? If even His own mother and brothers are worried about him and his activities, is He crazy? Or a true prophet? Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference.

But they get in the boat, and Jesus lays down on a cushion in the back of the boat and falls asleep. Sometimes it seems as if Jesus is asleep in our boats too—that God is far away.

I used to have an app on my phone which measured my distance for my bicycle ride and calories spent, average speed and estimated time for my ride and actually talked to me every mile. At one point during the ride, about 1 ½ miles from the end, the voice would cheer me on, "You can do it," she would say! "You can do it" theology is popular at any time. Pulling oneself up by the bootstraps and taking full credit for it massages the ego. But the message of the Bible from beginning to end is that the power is in God and not in us. That's why we sang the Navy Hymn, "Eternal Father, Strong to Save," today.

*O Savior, whose almighty word
the wind and waves submissive heard,
Who walked upon the foaming deep,
And calm amid its rage did sleep;*

Or consider another hymn:

*My hope is built on nothing less
 Than Jesus' blood and righteousness;
 I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
 But wholly lean on Jesus' name.
 On Christ, the solid rock, I stand;
 All other ground is sinking sand, all other ground is sinking sand.*

I want to suggest that when Jesus says to the disciples, “Why are you so afraid? Have you no faith?” He isn’t scolding the disciples or telling them they should never be frightened or panicked or angry when raging storms come their way. The story of Jesus calming the storm isn’t primarily about our faith, or even the faith of the disciples. It’s not about us. It’s about Him. It is about His power and identity.

The storm on the lake was a foreshadowing that the Christian life does not always involve smooth sailing. Rather there are times when the going is extremely rough. But even during those times, Jesus is with us.

This story is about the power of God that was made manifest in Jesus Christ: Power that was witnessed by many people, including the disciples. The story is about power that was so life-changing that these people wrote down the stories and passed them along to us.

Did you catch verse 36b? It’s almost a throw-away line and perhaps a little confusing. “Although other boats followed,” it says. This may be no more than Mark's way of telling us that the group of disciples was too numerous to fit into one boat, but it suggests to me that it is not only the followers of Jesus who are in the boat with Him who see the power of God. Others, who may not be in the boat with Jesus, can also see and come to believe.

That’s what makes our faith and the faithfulness of the church so important. We still have an important role to play in society and in our communities. When we live out our faith, people see Jesus at work in and through us, and can come to believe. Through us, Jesus is still at work calming the storms in people’s lives. We can bemoan what we don’t have and what we can’t do, but do you realize that eighty-five percent of all Protestant congregations throughout history are either declining, plateaued or already dead! Wherever we are in our life cycle as a church, we still have work to do to show Jesus to those who need to see Him. And who doesn’t need to see Jesus? Who doesn’t need Jesus?

That’s why United Methodists from all over the world, including United Methodists in Wisconsin, gather together in an Annual Conference. This Friday and Saturday, United Methodists of Wisconsin will gather, still virtually at this time, to worship and to celebrate ministries, both continuing and new ministries. We gather together to grieve churches which can no longer go on, but celebrate new churches of new believers. We will gather together to consider a \$6.1 million budget for 2022 in Wisconsin so people in our communities and in our State and around the world can see Jesus stand up in the boat and shout to the storm, “Silence! Be still!”

Annual Conferences ordain, commission and license clergy and give awards to both clergy and laity who do the work of God in mission and ministry, that even those in other boats can see

Jesus in our midst. Annual Conferences and the churches, laity and clergy who are the members of the Annual Conference, pray, sing, worship, wrestle with issues, and do business because we believe that Jesus is in the boat with us.

The time is urgent for the Church to step up, trust in the God who calms the storms and invest in issues of mercy and justice. The basic question for United Methodists is not, "What is best for the United Methodist Church?" but "How can we be most faithful to God?" There are no guarantees that we will even be one Church after the General Conference of 2022 in Minneapolis, but Jesus is still in the boat and can calm any storm.

The miracle story of Jesus' calming the storm at sea testifies to two truths. First, as the divine Son of God, there is nothing Jesus cannot do to keep us from ultimate harm. Second, as Jesus' disciples living in a sinful, imperfect world, we are in for some rough times. This gospel story confirms that the boat in which Jesus and his disciples found themselves went through a real storm, a real threat.

The storm doesn't blow around their boat just because Jesus is on board. It hits them full force. Nowhere does Jesus promise his followers anything different. A peaceful voyage is not the ticket Christians travel on. But a peace-filled journey, with Christ always present, is. Jesus Christ's promise is not to sail us around every storm but is to bring us through all storms -- still in one peace.

"Always remember, I'm in the boat with you," Jesus says in effect, "and I've got this."

The storms hit us, too, often with great fury. Many devastating hurricanes can hit our lives no matter where we live:

- + Hurricane Cancer
- + Hurricane Divorce
- + Hurricane Unemployment
- + Hurricane Financial Crisis
- + Hurricane Grade Point Average
- + Hurricane Child Illness

Too often, we call to Jesus as a last resort, after we admit that we have reached our limits. The disciples in the boat with Jesus learned their limits right away. The storm was too big for them. But it's not too big for Jesus; no storm is too big for Jesus.

What's your hurricane?

Where is Jesus during these storms?

Where is Jesus when the typhoon of devastating illness hits?

Where is Jesus when the lightning strike of a loved one's death leaves us in shock?

Where is God when the waves of death, destruction, and doubt threaten to sink us?

Where is Jesus?

In the boat, with us, and there he invites us to turn from fear to faith -- the kind of faith that Jesus himself had in the God who brings order out of chaos and will one day still all storms forever and lead us across the lake and bring about the calm and joy and peace and glory of the Kingdom already in process.