

WESTWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH/JUNE 21, 2009

WINDS AND WAVES/MARK 4:35-41

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I. THE TEXT

Our gospel lesson is Mark chapter 4, verses 35 through 41 – the familiar story of Jesus calming the storm. This little story is so central to the gospel of Jesus Christ that it is told by all four of the gospel writers and Mark records a second windy night and a late night water walk just a couple chapters down the road. Thus, there is something essential for the life of faith wrapped up in what happened one night on a stormy sea. Hear the word of God from Mark chapter 4...

³⁵On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side."³⁶And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him.³⁷A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped.³⁸But 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?"³⁹He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm.⁴⁰He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"⁴¹And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

II. PRAYER: Lord, silence in us any voice but your own now, for we have come to hear your word for us; to be reminded that we are not alone, that who we are and what we do matters to you. Amen.

III. WORRY CULTURE

Storms in life come in all shapes and sizes. I was a college freshman when a gasoline shortage struck. My recollection is that in a matter of weeks the price jumped from something like \$0.29 to \$0.42 a gallon. As my dad made his meager living as a sort of itinerant preacher – to me – the 13-cent leap felt nothing short of catastrophic. I panicked. This was my 18-year-old thought process – “Skyrocketing gas prices – my dad will lose his job. At 45 he’s way too old to learn to do anything else. My parents will have to sell the house. I will need to drop out of college, go live with my destitute parents in a shelter somewhere and get a job waiting tables.” Sounds funny now, but I lost sleep over my life’s first gasoline storm. In my monthly 3-minute long-distance call home, I admitted – “With these gas prices – is dad going to be able to keep his job? Should I leave college and come home?” To which my mother very calmly said, “Sweetie, has God failed us yet?”

“Well, No,” I replied.

“And, we’re going to be just fine. Enjoy school – don’t worry. God has yet to fail us and isn’t about to start now.”

Those were my mother’s version of Jesus’ words that stormy night – “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” Oh, if only it was that easy – especially in a culture that pushes fear like peanuts at a Dodger game. Let’s face it, storms are raging these days. So much to worry about – gasoline prices, soured economy, climate change, Iraq, Iran, North

Korea, terrorists, lead-laced toys, crime rates, swine flu, mortgage meltdown, sagging stock markets – on and on goes the unending list of challenges. One thirty-minute newscast, one trip through the Los Angeles Times and our heart races, our blood pressure jumps – we are whipped into a fine panic.

And your particular storms? What worries do you harbor in the quiet of your soul this morning? Not all storms make the news; some are highly personal. What will my physical reveal? How will my marriage make it? Will the money cover the bills this month? There are church worries – will income meet expenses? Will we be ok once Charles retires? And, of course, just how late **will** the service run today?

Whatever our storms, even the big one called death, Jesus says to us as my mother said to me 35 years ago – “Sweetie, God has yet to fail us and isn’t about to start now.”

IV. THE STORM

Well, the disciples had plenty to worry about that night. It had been all-day-church day. As Jesus teaches and preaches by the sea of Galilee the crowds crush in on him until finally he is forced to move his pulpit into the boat and teach from there. All day the parables come as Jesus drifts by the shoreline – a sower went out to sow... a lamp under a bushel basket... the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed... one after another the parables flowed, the folks hanging on every word.

Now I’ve never experienced such a phenomenon – generally at about 14 minutes into a sermon, from my vantage point, the subtle and not-so-subtle “watch glances” begin – I get the message – “time to wrap it up preacher.” Not so with Jesus. The people hang in there through lunch... the afternoon slips away... evening arrives, but the congregation stays. Jesus, on the other hand, stuck in the boat for hours, is clearly finished. You might be surprised at how intense this preaching thing can be – most preachers are ready for a nap after a morning of worship. And Jesus? He’s been at it for a full day. And he is done, finished, out of gas. Finally he says to his disciples, “Get me out of here – let’s go to the other side.” The text says they left the crowd standing on the shore and the disciples “took Jesus with them in the boat, just as he was.”

Dog-tired... the disciples settle Jesus on a cushion at the back of the boat and set sail on what should have been a fairly routine trip to the other side – after all, these were very skilled fishermen. And they’d grown up on this sea – they knew it’s temperaments. But this crossing would be far from routine. Again, the disciples had plenty to be afraid about that night. A fierce windstorm, the mother of all squalls tears across the sea and across their boat. Enormous waves toss the boat like a bathtub toy. And they are experienced enough to know they weren’t experienced enough for this one... understandably, they are terrified.

Meanwhile, Jesus remains nearly comatose on the cushion at the back of the boat... oblivious. Which, no doubt, irritates the disciples. If they are all going to die, Jesus ought to at least be awake to share the experience. They roust him, screaming no doubt – “Rabbi – we are going down, don’t you even care?”

Who of us has not prayed that prayer in the midst of a storm? I sure have. I worry, I get panicky. How about you? “God, this is awful – don’t you even care?” It’s an accusatory, frustrated prayer when I pray it. “You’re supposed to be helping me here Lord – have you drifted off to sleep, again? Lounging in the Bahamas perhaps?” Remember as well

that Mark writes this gospel for a storm-tossed first-century church. They too must have felt like the crew of a tiny, vulnerable wave-tossed ship as they endured intense persecution, wondering where on earth God was in their time of need. The disciples utter the hurt and exasperation felt by them and all of us from time to time in the midst of our many worrisome storms. “Rabbi – don’t you even care we are perishing?” This economy is crushing us. Don’t you care? Diagnosis, cancer. Don’t you care? You name the storm... Jesus, don’t you care? Don’t you care?

Jesus wakes from his sleep and stunned disciples watch as he “muzzles” the wind... Jesus then speaks to the sea, and perhaps as well to the storm raging in the disciples’ hearts, “Peace! Be Still!” And by his word, the text tells us, the wind ceased, the roiling sea stilled to a dead calm. The disciples’ panic melts away. Jesus then turns to his fellow passengers – “Tell me why are you afraid? After all we’ve been through together, after all you’ve seen and heard, have you still no faith?”

V. STORM MANAGEMENT

As much as I love this little story, I struggle with it. And the struggle is not so much the question of how such a thing could happen; the struggle is with what the story seems to be saying. First is Jesus’ question... “Why are you afraid?” If I’d been in the boat that day, I’d likely have jumped on Jesus for that one. “Isn’t it obvious? Drowning isn’t on my top ten list of ways to die – and certainly wasn’t on my plans for the evening. That’s why I was afraid!” But, note that Jesus is not telling them here to have no fear, he is asking them simply to examine their fears. His concern is that they let their fears run away with them to the point of panic... to a point of faithlessness. Jan Richardson says of the disciples. “They were right to feel afraid – [storms are scary]. Yet their perception that their reality was defined solely by the storm only increased their experience of being overwhelmed. The presence of the storm was not the whole truth of their situation – there was a sleeping savior in the stern.”¹

The British Navy has an interesting custom. If there is a sudden disaster aboard ship, the “still” is blown. Now this particular still is not a place where whiskey is made, rather it is a whistle that calls the crew to a moment of silence in the midst of the crisis. When the still is blown, people aboard know that it means, “Be still. Stop and think – prepare to do the wise thing – not the panicked thing.” Apparently that “still whistle” calling for a moment of calm has helped avert many a catastrophe by preventing the scatterbrained chaos that often accompanies panic. Perhaps in the midst of our storms we would be wise to blow the “still whistle” in our own souls... wise to take a moment, no matter the crisis to remember we are not alone, the storm is only part of the truth – Jesus is in the back of the boat. St. Augustine had this to say about those times we find ourselves in the storm, overwhelmed by panic and fear like the disciples. He said, “Christ is asleep in you. What do I mean? I mean you have forgotten his presence. Rouse him; then remember him, let him keep watch within you, pay heed to him.”² Indeed, the storm is not the whole truth – there is a sleeping savior. All will be well...

Or will it? That is my second struggle with the storm story. I want all storms to have happy endings... It seems not all storms do. Jesus seems to still some storms, but not all – indeed it seems as if he’d intended to sleep all the way through this one. I’m sure there

are many “Lord, do you not care that we perish” prayers spoken when planes dive into the ocean, when a loved one slips away, a job vanishes, a relationship crumbles. No fairy-tale endings there. Don’t those awful storm stories negate today’s happy storm story – at the very least set us up for disappointment when Jesus doesn’t seem to calm our particular storm?

Oh how we wish that happily-ever-after was Jesus’ promise in every storm. Jesus would have many more followers than he does – it would make my job a whole lot easier – our pews would be full every Sunday. But, as much as we would prefer to reduce this story to an assurance that nothing bad will ever happen to us or that God will deliver us if it does, we know that is not true. Not every unsettling storm settles into a placid pond and that is difficult for us. Indeed, later on in the gospel story Jesus doesn’t even calm his own storm – his own prayer – three times, no less – in the garden, “let this cup pass from me” did not go his way. “Happily ever after” endings are not the promise of this story. Rather the promise is that no matter the trial, we are never in it alone... we have strength and a resource in Jesus no matter the storm... even the storm called death. As our Presbyterian *Brief Statement of Faith* puts it, “In life as [well as] in death we belong to God.”

On one of John Wesley’s many Atlantic crossings, a fierce storm broke out; hurling the ship about like a twig. While Wesley and others clung to their bunks cowering in fear, a community of Moravians, traveling to their new homeland, calmly gathered to hold their daily worship service. Wesley watched as the Moravians, apparently unperturbed by the howling winds, crashing waves and the real possibility of death, sang hymns of praise. Wesley realized he was witnessing a truly storm-proof faith. From that moment on, John Wesley prayed that God would give him the ability to ride out life’s storms with as much faith and peace as the Moravians.³ An experience and prayer that would change his life dramatically. Perhaps we would all do well to pray that prayer.

It is Jesus’ last question of his disciples that troubles me the most. “After all we’ve been through together,” he said. “After all you’ve seen and heard, have you still no faith?” It troubles me because it shines a light on my own failure to remember God’s track record in my life. Each of us has a litany of God’s faithfulness in our direction – think back over your own story – moments of grace when you most needed – or least expected – it, the mystery of things working out for good when they seemed so bad. Part of our work when the storms flail is to remember that God’s seen us through storms before. It’s been 35 years since my mother said to me – “Sweetie, we’re going to be just fine. God has yet to fail us and isn’t about to start now. Don’t you worry.” I consider my life and its fair share of rough patches... God has walked me through every last one. I’ve a long history now of God doing what God does – no doubt you do, too. And it is only in retrospect that I am aware of a good bit of it. Maybe that is your story as well.

VI. A FINAL WORD

In my brief time here a number of you have shared with me some of the storms tossing your boat right now. From the economy to crumbling relationships to health scares, the storms are real, and fierce. I think of our own church’s storm – next Sunday Charles steps into retirement – that has us wondering what will become of us. We all face storms – even for the disciples, even for Jesus, there was no free pass.

In Frederick Buechner's words: "Christ sleeps in the deepest selves of all of us... may we call on him as the fishermen did in their boat to come awake within us and to give us courage, to give us hope, to show us, each one, our way. May he be with us especially when the winds go mad and the waves run wild... so that even in their midst we may find peace... we may find Christ."⁴□

Whatever storms you face, whatever worries you harbor in the quiet of your soul this morning... take to heart the words of my mother – "Sweetie, we're going to be just fine. God has yet to fail us and isn't about to start now. So don't you worry."

Amen and amen.

¹ Jan Richardson, <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2009/06/15/stirring-the-sleeping-savior/>

² Augustine, Sermons, 63:1-3: Pulpit Resource, 6-25-06

³ Homiletics, June 19, 1994

⁴ Frederick Buechner, "A 250th Birthday Prayer," *Secrets in the Dark*