

Mark 4:35-41  
A Boat on a Stormy Sea  
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This little gem of a story from the gospel of Mark must be one of the most well-known of all the gospel tales. It speaks so clearly of an experience I am sure we have all faced more than once. After all, how many times in the course of our lives have we looked around us, noticing the waves breach the sides of our boat, threatening to sink us? How many times have we called out for help to a God who seems to us to be sleeping? How many times have we seen the sun break through from the safety of the other shore only to realize that it wasn't the overcoming of our fear that got us there, but our faithful response to get in the boat in the first place?

The take-away message in this little story might be to trust that as long as we have Jesus in the boat with us, we can depend upon him to calm the storm and deliver us through life's trials. Or perhaps it might be to recognize that when life's trials appear overwhelming, help comes if we ask for it. Or it might be, don't load twelve guys into a little fishing boat and head for open water.

In her lectionary reflection in the Presbyterian Outlook, Pastor Jill Duffield tells the story of turning to her church with a prayer concern even though she felt her problem was trivial compared to others' fears of chemotherapy or grief of the loss of loved ones. Just as I am sure would happen here at First Presbyterian Church, she still found folks coming up after the service, offering to help in whatever way she needed.

Like Pastor Duffield, we don't have to look beyond the daily news to see many, many people suffering in ways that we cannot imagine. It is easy to think that the price of comfort and ease that most of us enjoy is facing the slings and arrows of everyday existence alone. The fact is, this is not true. We can call on God to calm the storm, to part the clouds so that, maybe for no more than a moment, we can see our way on the path to which God guides us. We can call on each other for, if nothing else, a bigger picture than our own two eyes can see. This is important. As stormy as things can look sometimes, look around you, there is always someone nearby to pass you the peace you need.

Perhaps it is enough to hear the call to trust that Jesus can calm the angry seas that threaten our passage, to respond to Jesus' rebuke, "Peace! Be still!" as the wind and waves do, and know — in that holy stillness — who God is. Perhaps it is us, not Jesus, who needs to be stirred from sleep so that each of us according to our unique abilities can do what needs to be done to ensure our survival. These are all good readings of the text, but another emerges if we include the scene that appears before and the scene that follows.

Jesus' stilling of the storm takes place early in his ministry. He has just assembled the twelve disciples. They are still wondering about the nature of this man who has called them, why they have been called, and what he will ask of them. From the beginning, as they travel around Galilee with Jesus, they see enormous crowds gathered to witness healings and to hear Jesus' teaching. Imagine yourself as one of these twelve, hand-selected by the one at the center of the crowd, surrounded by the same adoring crowd that surrounds him.

This time, the crowd gets so close that Jesus has to get into a boat, paddle out a bit, and teach from there. I imagine the disciples must get a big charge from this. I know I would. There are no challenges, no tests or trials, just adoring crowds who hang on every word and bask in the presence of Jesus and his disciples. They have every reason to get very comfortable with this arrangement. I can imagine they would never want it to end.

By the way, the author of the gospel of Matthew places Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount, three entire chapters of uninterrupted teaching, just before this story of Jesus' stilling of the storm. Imagine the enrapt attention of that crowd inviting Jesus to go into such depth, upending the rules and customs of the time. We probably have that crowd to thank for one of the most beloved and, frankly, challenging passages of scripture. Imagine the disciples nodding their heads in agreement to Jesus' teaching as if they understood every word, every nuance.

Rather suddenly, Jesus declares, "Let us go across to the other side." The other side. The Gentile side. The side without the adoring crowds. The side where no one knows or cares who Jesus is, let alone who his disciples are. I can imagine whatever condition the sea got itself into during that trip was nothing compared to the inner storm the disciples must have been conjuring in themselves.

And not without cause. In chapter 5, Mark tells us that they come to the country of the Gerasenes. It was well known as one of ten seats of Roman power called the Decapolis. For Galileans oppressed by Roman colonizers, this must have amounted to entering the belly of the beast.

Sure enough, as soon as they stepped out of the boat, they were confronted by what Mark calls "a man with an unclean spirit," a demoniac. You know the story, I am sure. Jesus commands the demon which calls itself "Legion, for we are many" to leave the man. I have cited Dr. Alex Gee before, from the Fountain of Life Covenant Church in Madison. He reads this demon, not as a supernatural being nor as some unnamed psychopathology, but as the legion of institutional forces — governmental, economic, and, yes, religious — that assign labels and categories to individuals: the poor, the felon, the illegal immigrant, the racially inferior, the not normal. Forget the pea soup and the psychiatric diagnoses, this kind of demonic possession is one that countless of our neighbors truly do suffer from.

Jesus, far from the warm embrace of the crowds on his native shore, liberates the man from this tyranny. The demon leaves and enters a herd of pigs which immediately run off a cliff into the sea and die. The swineherds, likely knowing that they will be held responsible for the loss of these valuable assets placed in their care, are less than eager to celebrate with the man Jesus has liberated. The liberation of others is fine as long as it doesn't cost us anything. They beg Jesus to go home and take his liberating ways with him. Certainly not the warm welcome he enjoyed on the other side of the lake, but not, by any means, the worst thing that can happen under Roman rule.

Taken in this slightly larger context, I can see this story of Jesus stilling the storm as a prescription for how to be a disciple of Jesus, not just for those twelve men long ago, but for all us here and now, as well. Through their association with Jesus, they have experienced the adoring crowds, the unchallenged hearing of the gospel, just as, in this space, we experience the comfort of like minds and joined hearts, a community that bends its collective ear to hear the word of God. But the path Jesus sets before us

is not one of easy 'speaking and hearing' of God's word. Jesus calls us to get in the boat and go to the other side.

The anxiety the disciples felt in the boat crossing to unfriendly territory is perhaps not so different from the anxiety we feel once we leave the comfort of these walls and must turn to face neighbors with whom we do not agree on one thing or another. Anxiety is the product of a narrow view. We strain to see what has not yet happened, dreading the worst. In doing so, we miss the fact that the boat has not yet sunk, that all is not yet lost. We overlook the presence of the ones who wait nearby for us to ask them for help. Maybe we even miss the ways we could help someone else in greater need than we are.

But the comfort found in friendly embraces, adoring crowds, the easy validation of like minds, the comfort in the knowledge that my family has a home and enough to eat is the product of a narrow view as well. The path of true discipleship leads beyond the narrow view. Beyond the comfortable dream of our religious and political assumptions, and beyond the terrifying nightmare of watching those assumptions sink beneath the waves that threaten to overcome us. There is no better antidote for a narrow view than gazing open-eyed into the face our own demise.

I wonder if Jesus is asking the disciples not to put their hope in the calming of the storm, or in their safe return to their native shore, or even in the liberation of the Gerasene man, but in something else altogether.

See? The calming of the storm was easy. Just a word and it is done. Just a few moments and the journey is past. Just a command and the demons flee.

What is difficult? What carries the price of your very life trying to bring it about? Put your hope in that.

Jesus was asking them, as he asks us today, to let go of narrow views, whether they produce comfort or anxiety, so that we can see a bigger picture, one that includes the welcoming crowds and the angry swineherds, one that includes their rescue from the storm and the liberation of the Gerasene man, one that includes the loneliness of crucifixion and the promise of eternal life.

Perhaps Jesus is today asking us to loosen our dependence on comfortable answers and rote beliefs. Perhaps Jesus is asking us to expand our view, to open our hearts to see the joys and pains, the bravery and the terrors, the living and the dying of every being that shares this life with us. If we can do that, what becomes of our anxiety; what becomes of our comfort? Do we still have no faith?

Please join me in prayer:

Precious Jesus,

We hear your call to leave the comfort of our easy answers and familiar terrain. Give us the desire to follow you to the other side. Give us the courage to face, not just the storm of passage, but the storm within that fears the unknown shore. Awaken us to be instruments of your compassion to offer help to those who struggle against whatever chains in which they find themselves. Lord, we believe; help thou our unbelief. Amen.