

Psalm 107:1-3, 23-52 ~ Mark 4:35-41

Don't You Care?

5th Sunday after Pentecost ~ Sacrament of Baptism/Profession of Faith ~ June 23, 2024

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Introduction to Gospel Text:

To this day, the Sea of Galilee, (now called Lake Kinneret) is known for producing sudden squalls that can arise on the calmest of days. We can only guess why Jesus' fishermen disciples did not warn him, (former carpenter, not fisherman) that crossing the sea in the evening on this dodgy body of water, was an extremely risky and dangerous move. Today's gospel lesson picks up right where we left off last Sunday, on the shore where Jesus had been teaching the crowds from this boat, delivering a bunch of parables about the Kingdom of God.

As you will see, no one, not even Peter warned Jesus as they set sail to "go across to the other side." Our opening verse 35 sets an ominous tone. Both at the literal level of lake navigation, but also in the metaphoric, larger context of what was going on in the gospel story. New risk and danger (cue the minor chords) as they go to the other side. Up to this point Jesus' ministry had been among familiars on home territory in and around Capernaum. Jesus, who was a Jew, had been healing and teaching among his own people, other Jews. But now, for the first time he was leading them into the unknown, crossing a boundary to a people and land beyond. To people who were not Jews: Gentiles and gentile cities.

This dramatic story of Jesus stilling the storm is told in Matthew, Mark and Luke. But, only in Mark do they set out at night. Only in Mark do they berate Jesus, "Teacher, do you not care, that we are perishing?" (Wouldn't you guess that it was probably Peter was the one who actually said this?) And in Mark's telling is there no marveling by the disciples in response to Jesus saving them by stilling the storm as there is in the other two gospels. The literal translation of verse 41a, which you see in our bulletin (NRSV): "And they were filled with great awe" is literally in the Greek: "They feared a great fear." Perhaps they knew more than we give them credit for. Perhaps in their gut the risky boundary crossing, bridge-building expanse of Jesus' ministry was beginning to dawn on them. They may have been starting to realize that the storm that Jesus had just calmed was nothing compared to unknown and bigger storms ahead.

Now we are ready to hear the story. The sun is just setting as we set sail in the boat with the disciples and an exhausted Jesus. Don't you think he might have been an introvert? If so, after a full day of teaching, he would have been in desperate need of some down time and some sleep. Notice how quickly he sinks into a deep slumber. Okay: enough with the preamble, let us partake in the sacred in this reading of God's Holy Word.

Sermon:

"Hello, I'm Anxiety!" Yes, I'm quoting the new emotion/new character who pops onto the scene inside Riley's brain. She has bright red hair and an orange body. I'm talking about a character in the recently released movie, "Inside Out 2." You may recall that back in the first "Inside Out" Pixar movie released in 2015, Riley was an 11-year-old girl moving to San Francisco.

In its new sequel Riley has just turned 13, just hit puberty, and with it she gets 4 new emotions depicted as characters in her brain: Envy, Embarrassment, Ennui, and most of all, center stage, "Anxiety."

Remember when you were 13 years old? In an interview with Lisa Damour, Clinical psychologist and Inside Out 2 consultant, Dr. Damour said something interesting about the movie character, "Anxiety." Apparently "Anxiety," was originally cast as a villain, but as the movie developed, she got much cuter. Not as much a villain as part of the team, Anxiety became a valuable partner, inside Riley's brain. Which in fact, rings true to the function of anxiety at any age. Within bounds, anxiety is extremely important to our mental and spiritual well-being. Uncomfortable as it is, anxiety is valuable. That is, *healthy* anxiety. There is, of course, also unhealthy anxiety, which can be truly debilitating.

Perhaps, that is why, after stilling the storm, Jesus' first question to his freaked-out disciples was not "*Do not be afraid!*" But rather, "*Why are you afraid?*" Certainly, being in the middle of a deep lake with waves crashing and swamping the boat, fear and anxiety were entirely appropriate emotions. Healthy fear and anxiety. Being professional fishermen, they all knew how to handle boats in stormy weather (except for Matthew, the accountant, who likely became *doubly* anxious when his professional sailor buddies started losing it). In Mark, especially, their collective panic attack is not muted. In Matthew, they say "Save us Lord," in Luke they say, "Master, Master, we are perishing!" But only in Mark, the first gospel written down, do we see the cortisol pumping through their brains, flipping over into anger most clearly: "Teacher, don't you care that we are perishing?"

"Teacher!" Even stilling the storm became a teachable moment for Teacher Jesus. Their lessons were not over for the day when they got on the boat. What *was* he teaching them? An easy answer, a sermon one might preach would be, Jesus was teaching them: "*Don't worry, as long as you have Jesus in your boat nothing really bad will ever happen to you. If you just have enough faith, all your problems will be solved, and you will live happily ever after.*" Although this lesson might be sound good, you and I know that this is so not true. Therefore it cannot be the lesson Jesus, who said, "I am the truth," has for us today. Nor is this a sermon about how faith in Jesus takes away our fears and anxieties and gives us problem free sunshine all the time.

In real life (now sometimes referred to as IRL), no matter how hard we try or how hard we pray, let's be honest: we still experience horrendous storms of pain, heartache, and unspeakable loss. Anxiety and fear are the appropriate and healthy emotions, signals to our brains and hearts, that we are being called into new and challenging waters. Being called from what we know, what is comfortable to something we don't know, something uncomfortable. In the case of the disciples in the boat that night, perhaps they were beginning to see the wider and fearsome awesome work they had signed up for when they left their nets.

Jesus' message of healing and wholeness for all people, meant and means crossing to the other side. Caring about those who are different than we are. Of course, Jesus cared about his disciples that day in the storm-tossed boat. He also cared for everyone who is on the edge.

And for all who are experiencing injustice, oppression, exploitation. His care, his compassion for all led him to the cross. Even in this little 7 verse story that occurred at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, you can see powers of chaos and destruction, the whispers of death being overmatched by the ultimate power of resurrection.

What was Jesus teaching his disciples that day? What is the point of my sermon today? The fearsome, awesome work of following Christ was risky and dangerous. It is also life changing, life-giving and do-able, because Jesus is in the boat with us. Our God loves and cares for us so profoundly, God chose to be in the "same boat" with us – the boat of experiencing all the emotions inside our brains and hearts and spirits firsthand by becoming human. In order to save us all. To do this work, Jesus had to be a boundary crosser. He crossed over to the other side. Again and again. And Jesus calls us to do the same. Remember what President Abraham Lincoln said when asked which side of the Civil War did, he think that God was on? He answered, "Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God's side, for God is always right."

Here at FPC, we understand God's side calls us to be advocates and allies, for those on the edge, for "the least of these who are members of my family" as Jesus put it in his Matthew 25 parable that focuses and catalyzes our mission here. How are we doing that? Multiple ways, more than I can name right now. Here are a few: Yesterday and today, we are hosting the Mexican Mobile Consulate to ally with our undocumented neighbors who live and work among us. Next Saturday we will have a table at the Gay Pride event downtown, offering blessings and love, being allies with our LGBTQ neighbors in a visible way. For the next two weeks I will be setting sail to navigate the seas of General Assembly, the ruling body of our entire PC(USA) denomination. At this biannual meeting, we come together from all corners of our church to seek God's voice and discern our call to be Christ's hands and feet, eyes and voice.

Finally, looking across our nation, we can see the approaching brewing storm of our divisive national election season on the horizon, and whose "Anxiety" character in their brains *doesn't* start jumping loudly, wildly? We can be sure that *whichever* side wins the Presidential election this November, the other side, just less than half of our county, will be devastated. The Wisconsin Council of Churches has created resources for us to help navigate these turbulent waters. "Seven Prayers with Seven scriptures" for each day of the week during election season. And a short course called, "Loving Your Neighbor in Election Season" for congregations to use. I pray we can utilize these resources to tune up our ears and voices so that we can be on the side of civil discourse, to listen and love, to care for the other in these turbulent times. Surely that is God's side.

"Teacher, don't you care that we are perishing?" Our Savior, who cares for the whole world more deeply than we can fathom, calls his disciples to cross to the other side. Jewish theologian Michael Fishbane, in his book titled *Sacred Attunement* wrote, "Awareness of the Other is the heart of care." Isn't that the work to which our Savior is calling us? The "other" inside of us, the others around us, and those others whom we will never see or know.

We can do this with courage because we have a savior for whom death was not the final word. Being Easter people, the cross and the empty tomb backlight our whole life, every breath we are given to breathe on this earth. Whether it's a health issue that resists resolution, the worst planting season in half a century here in Wisconsin. Or if it's something exciting, but also unknown like having a new baby or spending your whole junior year of high school studying in Germany, Jesus gives us the power to face unknown uncharted waters with courage. Jesus, who truly knows us inside out. How? The Apostle Paul said it like this, "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39) Not even the perfect storm brewing inside of us. Or all around us.

I have a prayer to bring us to the other side, the shore of this sermon's end. I invite you to enter this prayer now: *God, help us believe in you. Jesus, teach us to trust you even when storms within and around us feel too big. Too scary. Help us to have faith to believe what you taught and are teaching us. You told the disciples they would be safe, but they were still scared of the storm. We hear your words. We say we believe you are in control, but we still struggle with deep fears and big questions. Hear us as we name our deep fears to you silently, right now. Fears in our own lives, fears for this world you came to save....*

The storms we face are so large, they threaten to swamp us. But we know they are not larger than you. Our problems are legion and seem unsolvable. But we know they are not as large as you nor beyond the scope or scale of your redeeming love. You said you would be with us. Help us remember your promise of presence, even in the depths of our doubts. Even when our hearts are pounding, and our palms get sweaty. Even when our tears will not stop falling. You are there. And Lord, when you tell us we are going to the other side of the lake, help us believe you, no matter what storms come our way. Amen.ⁱ

ⁱ Adapted from Steven L. Case, *The Book of Uncommon Prayer 2: Prayers and Worship Services for Youth Ministry*, (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, MI, 2006), p.103.