

Sermon: Mark 4:35-41
The Rev. Patricia Green
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The summer between my sophomore and junior years in high school, my father was transferred from Kirtland AFB, here in Albuquerque, to Eglin AFB, in Fort Walton Beach, Fla. I went from living in the high mountain desert to living on the water front. I traded the Land of Enchantment for the Land of Sunshine. It would only take a few weeks to figure out that Florida Sunshine often appeared in liquid form. It rained the first 58 days that I lived in Florida. But that didn't keep us from having fun in the sun. One of the first things my parents did was buy a boat that could be used for water skiing in the bayous as well as deep sea fishing in the Gulf of Mexico.

Whenever we planned to go fishing, my dad always checked the weather. You don't want to be caught out in the gulf when a storm blows up. Even on days when the weather channel said no storms were brewing, we were careful to keep our eyes on the horizon, knowing that a storm could arise in a moment's notice. I will always remember my first experience of being caught in a sudden storm. We could see the clouds on the horizon moving towards us. So we turned the boat back towards the pass. The wind blew from behind us helping us towards our goal. But the dark clouds of the storm were also being helped by the tail wind. My dad gunned the engine full speed ahead. We were in a race. Would the twenty-foot waves swelling up behind us overtake us before we reached the pass? My heart pounded. Every part of my body, mind and spirit urged our boat to go faster as the waves began to arc up and loom above us.

Whenever we read today's gospel story, I identify with the disciples. There is nothing more frightening than the raging sea or, for that matter, any flood waters. We have all seen the destruction of tsunamis and hurricanes and the 100-year rainfall. Maybe you, too, are inclined to identify with the disciples. (By the way, we did make it back safely.)

The story of Jesus calming the storm can be understood as either a miracle or a parable. A miracle story demonstrates the extraordinary power of Jesus over

nature. Ancient mythology depicts storms as conflict between God and the monster Chaos. Jesus tells the wind and the sea to be calm, and they obey.

As modern people, we tend to disregard miracle stories and think of them as stories from a bygone worldview. We rationalize them. The feeding of 5000 is not about multiplying the loaves and fishes, but about getting selfish people to share the food they are hoarding. We don't think of demons as responsible for storms on lakes or within the human psyche. We tend to turn to meteorologists and psychologists for such things.

So I think it is better to read this story as a parable of discipleship. Jesus calls his disciples to cross over the sea to the other side. Storms arise, making their trip hazardous. The disciples respond in fear and panic. Jesus uses this true-to-life experience to teach his disciples a lesson.

On that day, Jesus has been teaching the disciples and a crowd that had gathered on the lakeshore. He taught standing in a boat. When evening comes he is tired and ready to leave this crowd behind. He invites the disciples to cross over the lake to the other side. Whenever the gospel of Mark refers to Jesus as going to the "other side", he is talking about the Gentile mission. Jesus has been teaching his fellow Jews but now he is going to the other side of the lake where he will crossover into Gentile territory.

Mark is writing his gospel for the church in Rome, which was mostly Gentile. He is encouraging his community to continue spreading the gospel to Gentiles. His writing was widely disseminated and supported Christians as they faced persecution.

Today, we don't have to go to the "other side" to spread the gospel. Nor do we have to cultivate a church among the pagans of Rome. Gentiles (what today we would call the "unchurched") are all around us. Did you know that in Albuquerque, six out of every ten people are unchurched? As modern disciples of Jesus, we might not have to go anywhere but next door or to the mailbox or the grocery store.

After a long day of teaching, Jesus relaxed in the stern of the boat and fell asleep. Suddenly, without warning, a storm arose and the waves beat into the boat so that

the boat was being swamped. The disciples woke Jesus up and said, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”

Mark uses the storm at sea to represent the difficulties the early church experienced in bringing the Gospel to others. The boat is an ancient symbol of the church. And there will be storms that persecute and even martyr the disciples.

Today we use boating terms to describe our physical church. Where the congregation sits we call the Nave, taken from the Latin “navis” meaning ship. So here you are sitting in the boat with the other disciples. As a church member, have you experienced difficulties sharing the gospel with others? Have you ever experienced the rocking and pitching of this boat? Perhaps you have even been thrown overboard a time or two? I served at a church that was nearly torn apart because they started a ministry to feed the homeless Sunday lunch. Every Sunday about 100 homeless men began to show up for the meal. There was no security, and church members became frightened by some of the men who were under the influence of alcohol and drugs. Some of the church members left the church. Eventually the ministry had to be closed. Not enough members were willing to stay and serve the meal.

The church is not a luxury liner granting everyone who boards safe passage, fun, excitement and joy. But it is more like a rescue lifeboat listing and leaking while Jesus sleeps at the helm. (Bp. Lyle Miller)

The disciples cry out in distress. Why is Jesus sleeping? Doesn't he care if they all perish? Isn't it interesting that when the disciples encounter distress their first response is to accuse God of failing them. Either God has no power or God doesn't care. Do we ever accuse God of not caring? The sad thing about their fear is the fact that just before our text, we are told that Jesus explained everything in private to his disciples but they don't get it.

Jesus immediately rises and rebukes the wind and the sea. This is the same word, rebuke, that describes how Jesus deals with demons and Satan. It is a response to the disciples' cry for deliverance from the monster Chaos. When the wind and sea are calm, Jesus asks “Why are you afraid, have you still no faith?”

Now that their panic has subsided, Jesus teaches them. He reminds them that there are two different worlds. There is the kingdom of God which is the presence and rule of God in our midst, which we access through faith. And there is the world of fear and chaos where we are orphaned, alone, without God.

I wonder if the disciples had had “faith” what would they have done differently. Should they have gone to sleep with Jesus, trusting that God would see them through the storm, or that if they should die, God has a room prepared for them in heaven.” Should they have rebuked the wind and sea, believing that what they ask for they will receive? How should faithful people deal with fear and difficulties?

The disciples are overwhelmed by a different sort of fear: the fear of this fearsome man who commands the wind and the sea, and they obey. “Who is this then?” No mere mortal, but God’s own Son: one who possesses God’s power over the natural and supernatural world. Some of Jesus’ previous miracles could have been done by other miracle workers, exorcists or magicians. But only God could overcome the wind and the sea.

This is the great turning point of the story. It is the moment of repentance. It is the moment that the disciples turn away from their fear and embrace faith.

Just as the disciples are challenged to examine their faith, this story challenges us to examine how we live our lives. Do we live in fear and anxiety? All of us experience storms in our life: loss of health, being dependent, loss of a job, death in our family, political unrest, racial conflict, and crime. Not to mention the difficulties we face when we spread the gospel. Why do we worry? A business weekly states that 40% of the time what we worry about never happens; 35% of our worries are about things that can’t be changed; 15% of our worries turn out better than expected; and 8% are useless, petty worries. What does living in fear do to us? It makes us cling and try to control everything. It causes us to become selfish. Sometimes it makes us angry and bitter.

What is the alternative? We trust God. We believe he loves us. We entrust ourselves, our loved ones, and our dreams-- into the care of God. We grow into deeper relationship with God. Doubts may emerge in times of crisis, yet we persist despite our doubts. We know that God cares, that he is in the boat with us.

Discipleship is a challenge. It isn't easy. There will be storms as we spread the gospel and live our lives. We must let go of what we fear. We must take hold of faith. Let go, let God.