

Mark 4:35 - 41

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?”

Grace, mercy, and peace to you, from God, our Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, who stills the storms and calms the seas, bringing peace even in the midst of our darkest and stormiest times that our faith may be strengthened. Amen.

For much of my life, in times of transition, upheaval or uncertainty I have typically trusted in my faith and an understanding that God had a plan somehow, somewhere. Through my teen years when my thoughts weren't always on the same page as my parents including things like getting my ears pierced and wearing short skirts, I talked with God (and my grandmother) about the whys of my parents rules. As a young adult in college trying to decide if I should get married and trek off to Japan with a military spouse, God was there listening and guiding. As a young mother raising children to a mother of teens and youth group adviser, God always seemed to be leading the way. Struggling to discern God's call in the Candidacy process – God was there.

In these past months, however, I easily identified with Job with my “why me??” questions to God. I quickly learned that there is nothing like losing a spouse for feeling like one is living in chaos or lost in the stormy sea. Like the frightened disciples I have said, ‘Do you not care that we are perishing?’

Our lives are turned upside down in a moment by all kinds of things – in years past the lives and homes of people in our area have been tossed about by flood waters; brought to a crashing halt by the closing or downsizing of companies; and over these past 15 months we have all felt the chaotic and tumultuous impact of living in a

pandemic. Turmoil, disorientation, confusion, sadness, fear – all poured together - a swirling of emotions in the sea of life.

The people in our lessons today are also in the midst of storms. A wealthy man living with his family and many flocks in the land of Uz, Job is blameless and upright. He becomes a topic of discussion between God and Satan. God talks about how virtuous Job is and Satan contests that Job is only living righteously because God has shown great favor to him. God contends that Job would be righteous no matter what and Satan challenges God to let him test it out. God agrees. In short order Job loses his flocks, his servants and all his children, and as if that weren't enough he is then afflicted with skin sores and illness. Job's friends try to help – first commiserating with his suffering and then questioning what he might have done to deserve God's retribution, even suggesting he's being punished for some wrong done by his children. In chapter 13 Job becomes angry at his friends calling them "worthless physicians." Job becomes bitter, anxious and scared. He deplores God's injustice that lets evil people thrive while he and other honest people suffer. Questions any one of us might ask if our lives were changed like Job's. He goes on in great length talking about his own virtues and righteousness. Then we come to today's text where God responds to all Job's questions and pleas for God to explain God's self. And God responds out of a whirlwind. God comes to Job within a storm, "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" We might paraphrase that "Who are you to question the one who created everything?!"

In our gospel lesson Jesus' disciples are being bounced around in their boat by the wind and waves out on the sea. It must have been quite a storm for the disciples to be so fearful. Remember a good number of them were fishermen – surely this wasn't the first time they had been at sea in a storm. Lake Gennesaret or the Sea of Galilee was known for its sudden and violent storms. Yet the disciples appear frantic and sure they are going to drown. Can't you just picture this – huge waves are splashing over the sides of the boat, water is filling up inside over their ankles maybe even coming toward their knees as the boat sinks down into the sea. They frantically try to bail out water. In their fear they turn toward Jesus who is calmly still sleeping in the stern of the boat. Incredulous – how can he be sleeping? They are being tossed about with no control. Quickly they wake him up, "do you not care that we are perishing?" Jesus speaks three simple words, 'Peace! Be still!' and the storm stops – the waters are calm.

What I find interesting is Jesus and God's response in these stories. Yes, Jesus calms the sea but then he takes the disciples to task, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" The disciples have been with Jesus for some time and been witness as he has taught through parables, healed the sick, cast out demons, cleansed a leper, even seen unclean spirits fall down before him shouting, 'You are the Son of Man.' The verses right before today's gospel say, 'With many such parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.' Yet they don't seem to know who Jesus is. "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" Or just maybe they are beginning to really understand exactly who Jesus is. Jesus rebuked the wind and it obeyed him. Rebuke is a really strong word and implies that one has done something wrong. It also implies the one doing the rebuking has authority. Jesus has authority over the wind and the sea – over creation. It is the same authority that God puts forth in responding to Job, 'Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?' Does the disciples' 'awe' or fear come out of their awareness that they are in God's presence? I imagine them also thinking, 'What now? What does this mean?'

Let's go back for a moment to the beginning of our gospel lesson. Jesus has been talking to a group of people through various parables about what the kingdom of heaven looks like. Now at the end of the day, as it is getting dark, he tells his disciples to get into the boat, 'Let us go across to the other side.' Most likely they are on the west shore where those gathered would have been mostly followers of Yahweh. On the other side of the lake live Gentiles – those who are not Jews, in other words 'those who are not like the disciples' who were mostly Galileans and Jews. You might say that Jesus is taking them from 'friendly' territory to unfriendly territory or from their comfort zone into the unknown. And as they cross the Sea, an unexpected dangerous storm comes up. They are tossed about and fear for their lives, they cry out to Jesus to wake up, to help them. And of course, he does. But then he asks, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?' Do you still not understand who I am? Do you not trust that even in hard times, I am with you?

In the end Job's life turns around – God blesses him and he comes out on the other side of all the awful things that happened to him in his life. The disciples, tossed from side to side in their boat by rough waters and tumultuous winds, feel the calming of the sea and the peace of a gentle breeze as creation responds to Jesus command to

'be still.' Jesus question to the disciples is also a question to us, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?' or as The Message translation puts it, "Why are you such cowards? Don't you have any faith at all?" They will get to the other side of the lake where there will be new people waiting to hear about Jesus. Jesus ministry will continue and there will be rough days ahead. However, the disciples and we are not alone – God is on the journey with us.

I am participating in one of the synod's FLATT classes, 'Dwelling in the Movement of the Spirit – Sermons that Spark Connection with the Divine. Barbara Brown Taylor was the preacher this week and in one of her sermons she said, "Maybe our lives are meant to upset our beliefs." That one sentence has stuck with me as I read this week's texts and prepared my sermon. I suspect the disciples would have liked nothing better than to have a quiet peaceful sail across the Sea of Galilee. Job would have preferred that his life continue as it had been with him happy, well off and enjoying his family. I doubt any of us would have chosen to have COVID-19 descend upon the world with all the disruption, loss of life and upset it has caused in our lives and around the world. Yet, I have heard and read a number of stories about the good that has come out of our living through this pandemic storm. Our congregations have found new ways of reaching not only our members but those who are new to the gospel who have found us via social media and the internet. Community organizations have found new ways to reach out to the hungry and homeless. Creativity has abounded. Just this morning I read about how the mRNA technology used in COVID-19 vaccines could help treat cancer patients. While some businesses have closed, new businesses have been born. A heightened awareness of our environment happened when everything shut down and we could see bluer skies. Political unrest has made us take pause and hopefully stop and listen more to those who have different thoughts and perspectives than our own. The heightened racial justice awareness led to President Biden signed into law a new federal holiday, Juneteenth. Yes life is filled with challenges but our Lord and Savior walks through the storms with us. And as our fears shake our faith, Jesus asks, "Why are you afraid?" He reminds us of his words from Matthew 18, 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among you.'

Jesus was sent to bring the gospel to all people so He and his followers had to 'go across to the other side.' His message and gift of salvation was and is meant for all people – those who speak different languages, whose skin is a different color, whose beliefs are not the same, for the lepers, the blind, the sick, and the disenfranchised. It can be messy and frightening. Going through the storms is part of the good news getting 'to the ends of the earth.' Their faith was shaken but also strengthened. Jesus

went with them, even went forward without them as he walked to Calvary. But he never left them.

As COVID restrictions begin to dissipate and what we knew as ‘normal’ begins to return in new ways, it is still for many a scary time. The uncertainty and loss are real. Our communities are the same but not the same. Each of us is the same yet not the same as we have been changed by the experiences of the past 15 months. Our congregations are the same but different. The pandemic closed our doors and gave us opportunities to see our mission differently. An article in the summer Living Lutheran called ‘Tear Down Magical Doors’ poses the question; “How can we stir up a culture change that focuses the church’s mission on the vocation of the baptized in these arenas (of daily life: family work, school, local community, citizenship and care for creation?)” The author encourages us to take our baptismal promises seriously again and to live them out in our everyday life.

Let us respond to Jesus’ questions, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” by living in the covenant God made with each of us in our baptism, to connect the faith we profess in God with our daily life. Let us step out in faith into the storms of life, and tell others about the difference Jesus Christ makes in our life, in all circumstances. Martin Luther defines faith as ‘that in which we put our trust,’ and says ‘Faith is a living, bold trust in God’s grace.’ Hebrews 11:1 reminds us, “*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*”

Jesus stretches out his arms and calls to us, ‘come **with** me through the storms across to the other side.’ I leave you with these words of a hymn by Georg Neumark,

*“If you but trust in God to guide you with gentle hand through all your ways,
you’ll find that God is there beside you when crosses come, in trying days.
Trust then in God’s unchanging love;
build on the rock that will not move.”*

And may you know the peace of Christ. Amen.