

Sermon

Proper 7B June 23, 2024

Mark 4:35-41

As you read through the Gospel of Mark, one scholar pointed out that it can be broken down into topical blocks. For instance, 2:1 – 3:6 is a block of controversies: scribes questioning Jesus' authority to forgive sins and griping about him eating with sinners and tax collectors, and Pharisees accusing him of breaking Sabbath law and plotting his destruction. 4:1-34 is a block showing Jesus as an authoritative teacher through his many parables, some of which we heard last week. Then there's a block of miracle stories that show his authority over the physical and spiritual realms, the human body, and even death. The first story in that block is today with Jesus calming the sea.

We all have special places we like to be. One of the places Joeline and I love being is the ocean, the Oregon Coast in particular. We've spent some time on east coast beaches, but they just don't compare to the Oregon Coast. I love the sound of the waves and the scent of the breeze and watching the sun set into the water. But anyone who has been around water knows it can be unpredictable, scary, and sometimes deadly. Think about hurricanes in the Atlantic and Gulf Coast, or tsunamis in the Pacific, or the Edmund Fitzgerald on Lake Superior. Despite my love of the ocean, I always try to follow the adage, "Never turn your back on the water."

It's important to remember that, for the people who would become Israelites, water was an uncontrollable, chaotic element to be feared. In the beginning the earth was a formless void and uncontrollable, and God separated the water from the dry land. As the people escaped Egypt they were caught between Pharaoh's army and the Red Sea, until God parted the waters. Jonah tried to escape God on a boat, but a storm arose and he was thrown overboard.

For people who have lived almost their entire existence inland in desert-like conditions, the sea is a terrifying thing. Land can be somewhat controlled – contained, fenced, shaped, sculpted, and cultivated; but water is a different thing altogether. The sea represents power and chaos, and in the beginning God controlled and subdued it. Today's miracle story shows God specifically working through Jesus.

Another aspect of this story is Jesus sleeping in the boat while the storm raged. We might wonder how that was possible, but remember that gospel stories have a wider view than we might think.

Psalms 107:25-29 speaks of stormy seas and God calming them. Psalms 35:23 and 44:23-24 both give us images of a sleeping God who is oblivious to the troubles and dangers of his people. In Isaiah 51:9, in the midst of the Babylonian exile, the prophet not only announces the end of the exile, but calls on God to awake from sleep and perform mighty deeds of power as of old. And sleeping Jesus evokes a complete trust in God, as exemplified in Proverbs 3, which admonishes God's people to keep the wisdom of God, thereby walking securely, not fearing when you sit down, and enjoying sweet sleep, for the Lord will be your confidence.

This miracle story reflects God's power, people's perception of a sleeping God, and putting your whole trust in the Lord. All of this is seen in how Jesus and the disciples act. With that in mind, let's revisit today's gospel.

It's been a long few days. The number of people coming to hear and see Jesus seems to grow by the hour. His family came to restrain him because they heard he had lost his mind. He moves down to the beach to allow for more room, but the crush of people is such that he needs to teach from a boat to keep from being overwhelmed. He tells parables about sowers and seeds, about

lamps and what you give away, and about small seeds with great potential. And at the end of the day he gets into a boat to cross over to the other side.

It's been a long, hard day – or maybe a long, hard couple of days, and Jesus is exhausted. He says, “Let’s go to the other side. I’ll get some rest along the way and we’ll start fresh tomorrow.” So the disciples, Jesus, and a few other boats head out on a 3-hour tour . . . well, maybe not that, but they voyage across the water to the other side.

Like that 3-hour tour, the weather started getting rough, and the tiny ship was tossed. The wind gets stronger and howls with a gale force. Waves form and begin beating against the boat, pitching it to and fro and up and down. As the wind gets stronger, the waves get bigger, some of them crashing over the side, causing the boat to take on water. With the boat rising up and crashing down over the waves, water breaking over the side, wind howling, and sea spray blinding the crew, one of them finally makes their way to a sleeping Jesus and yells over the noise, “Teacher! Do you not care that we’re going to die!!”

Then, in the noise of the wind and thunder, with waves crashing into and over the sides of the boat, the boat pitching wildly up and down, in the chaos of that violent storm, Jesus looks out and says, “Peace! Be Still!!”

The wind ceased and there was a dead calm.

“Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?”

There are many instances in Scripture that point to Jesus as from God or of God or with God, but this one might be the most powerful. In the beginning, God defeated the chaos of the water-filled void and created, bringing order to chaos. Jesus shows the same power over the chaos of the sea by bringing calm to the storm. As God seemed to sleep when his people were in danger, Jesus slept. And as we are called to trust in God completely, Jesus does not fear as he sleeps in the confidence of the Lord. God is at work through Jesus, and it is Jesus whom we follow through the storm.

This story is not just about individuals being saved from the storm (the disciples and us), it is also about the community of believers being saved, as shown by the other boats on the sea.

We live in chaotic times. The Church itself exists in chaotic times. Even so, let us not be fearful that Jesus is asleep or doesn’t care. Instead, let us sail on with courage, hope, and trust, believing that the Lord of life will not abandon us to the storm, but will be with us to achieve a divine purpose, even in the midst of chaos.

Why are you afraid?

Amen.