

Mark 4:35-41

Late that day he said to them, "Let's go across to the other side." They took him in the boat as he was. Other boats came along. A huge storm came up. Waves poured into the boat, threatening to sink it. And Jesus was in the stern, his head on a pillow, sleeping! They shook him, saying, "Teacher, is it nothing to you that we're going down?"

Awake now, he told the winds to pipe down and said to the sea, "Quiet! Settle down!" The wind ran out of breath, the sea became smooth as glass. Jesus reprimanded the disciples; "Why are you such cowards? Don't you have any faith at all?" They were in absolute awe staggered. "Who is this, anyway?" they asked. "Wind and sea at his beck and call?"

Before we even get to the storm, the first verse talks about crossing over to the other side of the lake. Did Jesus know what he would find on the other side? Or was this a way to show that in his boat, once you've been saved, there's no going back. Should we dare to go over to the other side? The other side where the poor, homeless, outcast, foreign, ill, the leper, the afflicted live. ....Jesus reaches (and heals) the un-clean on the other side of the sea, showing once again, God is an inclusive God. The good news is for all. We are still separating ourselves from each other - races, ages, religions, sexual orientations,... He is reminding us not to forget who might be on the other side. If our own circumstances were different, it could be us.

And in later verses; Jesus sleeping peacefully in the back of the boat in the midst of a raging storm, has got to be one of the great, biblical images. This is what it looks like to trust in God's caring no matter what the circumstances.

The drama of this story hinges on four questions, with a final exclamation:

1. Teacher, don't you care if we drown?
2. Why are you so afraid?
3. Do you still have no faith?
4. Who is this?
5. Even the wind and sea obey him!

A fierce storm has suddenly come up. The waves are high enough to wash over the side of the boat, filling it with water and threatening to sink it. Alarmed and in fear of their lives, the disciples rush to the back of the boat - and find Jesus sleeping! Notice that their understanding of Jesus' sleeping is that he doesn't care if they drown. But Jesus isn't asleep because he doesn't care. He is asleep because he trusts in God's caring. He's asleep on a pillow. In the hymn, "Will Your Anchor Hold", there's a line that goes "...steadfast and sure while the billows roll..." Singing in the Junior Choir, growing up in a city where the main industry was forestry, I had no idea what a 'billow' was. And anyway, I thought the word was 'pillow' so it made perfect sense to me.

Just a few short hours ago as they set sail with fair winds and calm seas, the disciples were not anxious about whether Jesus cared. They fished for a living and all had been out in storms much worse than this. What they weren't used to was having someone in the boat who could save them if something terrible happened. They still didn't realize who Jesus was. He was just, "Teacher."

We've all seen in the media a celebrity arguing with an RCMP officer over one thing or another and say in a loud voice, "Don't you know who I am?"

Sometimes right in the middle of chaos (of any kind) a moment of clarity appears. "Oh, now I see" is almost the entire biblical lesson. But this didn't happen with the disciples that evening - they still had no idea. Something as powerful as Jesus calming the wind and waves with a wave of his hand still didn't provide any clues. "Who is he?"

I'll give you three guesses. Teacher = Jesus = God

But they and us (unlike Jesus) identify caring with circumstance. We confuse the gifts with the giver; if circumstances are good then God is good and caring. But when circumstances change for the worse?

The hard part is when we don't think God hears us, or worse yet when we think God won't, or doesn't want to save us from drowning. How many times have we said, "Where are you, God? I can't hear/see you in the middle of all this chaos and heartache. Why won't you help me?" And then we wait for an answer; a miracle, an audible voice, a sign, something, anything.

We're afraid. Afraid of drowning in our fragile vessels; our lives, our churches, our homes, our jobs, our health. We're afraid of rejection, disapproval,

failure, death, or the death of a loved one. Our boat is very flimsy, indeed. For some of us the water is almost coming over the sides. Come on, somebody bail! (or is that bail?)

In this story the disciples can't pull themselves together...work as a team, the saying goes, they can't seem to find the strength they all have to save themselves on their own. It's Jesus who has to bring calm to the situation with the power of his presence. So we should do our best to get ourselves out of a perilous situation, And rely on the power of the Lord. Half and half? (God helps those who help themselves)

And so Jesus' questions to them, and us, "Why are you afraid? Do you still have no faith?" reveal a deeper truth: deep down our trust in God's caring is really quite shallow. Notice Jesus doesn't say, "There's nothing to be afraid of." As a mother might say to her child who has had a nightmare. Altogether different from the, "Do not be afraid," we hear many times in the scripture; shepherds, Mary, Joseph, Zechariah (Elizabeth's husband), the women at the empty tomb.....

"There Is something to be afraid of, but don't worry, I'm here."

Jesus had to save us (from ourselves) from drowning. I think he knew it was just a matter of time before the disciples would start to panic and wake him up ... before he stood up. Does Jesus sometimes get tired of waiting for us to figure it out on our own? Does he say, "Oh, alright then, I guess I'll have to make my powerful presence known- again."

"Do you still have no faith?"

"No, actually, we don't, even after all you've taught us, Teacher, we still have no faith. We only have fair -weather faith." Jesus demonstrates again for his disciples only, hoping they will commit to being faithful. (The story doesn't say anything more about the boats that were with him. It's thought they might have been disciple apprentices.)

Faith that vaporizes with the first hint of fear.

But mercifully, even though we have no faith, no trust-in-God's-caring-no-matter-what-the-circumstances, Jesus does respond to their/our fear, and orders the wind and sea to be quiet, to be still.

The question here, "Who is this?" echoes the same question asked back in Chapter 1 when the first thing Jesus did in his public ministry was to drive out an unclean spirit. (Verses 21 to 27)

And again in Chapter 2 when Jesus forgives the sins of the paralyzed man. (Verses 1 to 12).

Just as with the cases of the unclean spirit and the forgiveness of sins, the issue here is Jesus' authority/ ranking /status in the spiritual realm. Since all living things, all moving things are animated by spirits, Jesus demonstrates his authority over powerful spirits; the spirit of the wind and the spirit of the sea. They obey him, so Jesus must have higher authority.

But, the real question to ask of this story -is not,

“Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

But for us, the real question is,

“Who is this, that even raging, life-threatening circumstances don't disturb his sleep?”

The real miracle of this story is not Jesus calming the storm. I always wondered what/why Jesus was sleeping in the middle of a storm...would you? The real miracle is Jesus' calm while the storm is raging. His calm arises from within his faith, from within his trust in God's caring -no matter what the actual circumstances.

The moral of this story is not- run to Jesus when you are in a crisis and he will make the storm go away. Rather the moral is- run to Jesus when you are in crisis and learn from him the source of his calm. Hard to do.

Do the wind and the sea fill us with fear and terror? Then how should we respond to the one who the seas obey? Not with greater fear. Just the opposite. With awe and reverence. With, now maybe, finally, faith and trust-in-God's-caring-no-matter-what-the-circumstances. Hard to do.

I know you're there God, but where are you?

Why don't you save me?