

Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32
Mark 4:35-41

Fifth Sunday After Pentecost
Midway Presbyterian Church
June 24, 2018

Peace! Be Still!

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

In our Psalm today we first hear a call to thanksgiving, addressed to those who have survived some calamity. Then we hear of some who faced a stormy sea. In their trouble they cried to God and he delivered them. Listen to these words from Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

In our Gospel Lesson from Mark, we find the disciples caught in the plight of a threatening storm. They are fearful and lacking in faith. But Jesus calms the storm and saves beleaguered followers from a desperate situation. And they are amazed. Listen to these words from Mark 4:35-41...

Sermon

Literature gives us many stories about the sea and its storms and calms. Ernest Hemingway in *The Old Man and the Sea* writes of the relationship between boat and water. He tells of the silence of boats, where people seldom speak; and of the cruelty of the sea and the fragility of the birds that must fish them for food. In *Moby Dick* Herman Melville writes of the Typhoon in words that fairly crash from the page:

When darkness came on, sky and sea roared and split with the thunder, and blazed with the lightening, that showed the disabled masts fluttering here and there with the rage which the first fury of the tempest had left for its after sport.

More than once, you've heard me open our Worship service with the words of the Breton Fisherman's Prayer:

O God, thy sea is so great,
and my boat is so small.

And so we begin our worship, recognizing that sometimes life can feel like a wide sea: scary, hard to navigate, with storms that can arise when we least expect them. Our boat is just too small. We need God's help and guidance.

President Kennedy used this quote in his remarks at the dedication of the East Coast Memorial to the Missing at Sea on May 23, 1963. He also kept a plaque with the verse on his desk in the Oval Office.

In 1986 the hull of a first-century fishing boat, likely similar to the one in Mark, was found intact in the Sea of Galilee. It was 26 ½ feet long, 7 ½ feet wide, and 4 ½ feet high. The Sea of Galilee was notorious for its storms—storms that literally came out of the blue with shattering and terrifying suddenness. Being seasoned fishermen did not prevent these disciples from panic during this squall.

Now I think it is helpful to understand who the readers of Mark's gospel were. They were members of the church some 40 years after this incident happened. Mark begins the story this way:

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." (v. 35)

The other side is Gentile territory. And the early church was challenged to "cross over" to the Gentile mission, despite the turmoil this movement wrought in the church. Here we see Jesus stretching the boundaries of faith and mission, and calling his people to do the same. Not simply to journey inward, but outward as well. "Let us go across to the other side." But Mark is well aware that on the way they may face a storm.

There was other turmoil in the early church caused by persecution from Nero's Rome. In the 6th chapter of The Revelation we read:

When he [The Lamb] opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given. (v. 9)

For Mark no doubt, and for his readers, this miracle story of chapter 4 meant that the same divine Lord who had been able to save his imperiled disciples in the tumultuous tempest on the sea, was still present with his own, and would overcome the persecution and whatever threats they encountered.

In Lamar Williamson's commentary on Mark, he says that the corporate dimensions of this text's significance can be seen in an early Christian symbol adopted by the World Council of Churches at its formation during the dark days of World War II. "The church universal is depicted as a storm-tossed boat with a cross for a mast." The stilling of the storm continues to reassure the church in all times of persecution and distress that Jesus Christ is Lord, that he is ruler of nature and history, and that he is present with his disciples in their trials and tribulations.

Surely, this is a timely reminder to a church uncertain about its future, confused, afraid, rocked by stormy debates on divisive issues. Mainline denominations buffeted by continuing news of membership decline. A church uncertain that there will be enough money to do what needs to be done. But the text is no less significant for individual Christians in the face of tumult and danger.

Thankfully, Jesus calms the demonic storm: "Peace! Be still!" Our Psalm declared:

he made the storm be still,
and the waves of the sea were hushed. (107:29)

These words came after Jesus was awakened by fearful disciples, who experienced the waves beating into the boat and who said to him, “Teacher, do you not care if we perish?” Jesus awoke and calmed the storm. Then he asked his disciples “Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?” No, they didn’t have faith *like* Jesus, and they didn’t have abiding faith *in* Jesus.

Even disciples who were seasoned sailors had to come to terms with their limitations and inability to control their fate and destiny in the face of this sudden storm. Sometimes things seem so calm right before a storm arises: a sickness; a death; a loss of job; the failure of a relationship; an unexpected home repair that will cost thousands of dollars; something political that we could never have imagined. Fear can rise quickly to the surface when one feels a loss of control.

To their credit the disciples turn to Jesus, yet their turning was with the question, “Do you not care if we perish?” In times of tumult and tempest, a common human reaction is to wonder whether God in any real way cares about our problems. Though God neither slumbers nor sleeps (Ps 121:4), we try to arouse God to take care of us. At such times our Gospel Lesson can speak to us. It pictures Jesus in the boat with us, concerned for us, even when we do not perceive his care—Jesus able still, to still the storm.

“Why are you afraid, have you no faith?” In the wake of this life-threatening experience at sea, the memory of Jesus’ power and care was quickly forgotten. The mighty deeds prior to this event are numerous, but they do not serve to create faith here. The disciples’ memories were short and their trust level fickle. Faith had come, but it had not grown to the place of abiding confidence and trust. “Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?” We know, but in the storms we sometime forget. We forget the grace and mercy which has been extended to us throughout our lives. Fear supplants faith.

This does not mean that every human situation which comes along should be casually dismissed with a pious “if you only had enough faith, everything would be alright.” But there is validity to the popular slogan of Alcoholics Anonymous, “Let go and let God.” The faith which is trust means letting go of the need to control—to control God, others, and the world around us, or our own future. It is a posture of humility which acknowledges that I need to turn my life over to the care of God. For,

Thy sea is so great,
and my boat is so small.

George Matheson was born in 1842 and became a Scottish minister and hymn writer. As a young man with a sharp mind and a willingness to learn, he attended Glasgow University in Scotland. George was engaged to be married and had a dream of a promising future. But when he learned that he was going blind and there was nothing the doctors could do, his fiancée left, telling him that she could not go through life with a blind man. Though down, young Matheson wasn't beaten. And he held to his resolve to enter the ministry of the Church of Scotland. In spite of his pain and loneliness, he found a light that led him all the days of his life. In 1882, at the age of 40, he wrote that lovely hymn that we will shortly sing, “O Love that Will Not Let Me Go.”

O Love that will not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe,
That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.

A scene near the end of John Bunyan's classic allegorical novel *The Pilgrim's Progress* finds the chief character, Christian, the archetype of a person struggling to lead a life of faith, nearing the end of his symbolic journey. This journey requires him to cross a great and fearsome

river, and he is desperately afraid. Together with his friend Hopeful, they wade into the waters with trepidation. Bunyan has Christian cry out, “I sink in deep Waters; the Billows go over my head, all His waves go over me.” Hopeful replies with these grace-filled words: “Be of good cheer, my brother, I feel the bottom, and it is good...”

On a cold February 4, in 1943, the American ship, the *Dorchester*, was carrying several hundred soldiers off the coast of Greenland. Suddenly, an enemy torpedo ripped into its hull. Within minutes the ship would go under. Amid the panic and confusion, four chaplains: Alex Good, Jewish; John Washington, Catholic; Clark Poling and George Fox, Protestants, stood together with their life belts on. Many of the soldiers had none.

Without lifeboats, their chances for survival were nil. Quickly the chaplains took off their belts and gave them to four men. As the ship sank, the chaplains, with hands firmly clasped, prayed the Lord’s Prayer. Their trust in God overcame their fear of drowning.

My friends, when a storm assails our tiny boat on the immense ocean of life, let us remember the One who stilled a storm on the Sea of Galilee. And know that he can still our storm as well. Let us remember that,

God is our refuge and strength,
 a very present help in trouble.
 Therefore we will not fear though
 the earth should change,
 though the mountains shake in
 the heart of the sea;
 though its waters roar and foam...
 Psalm 46:1-3a

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.