

Lectionary 12

June 24, 2018

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint Mark. (Mark 4: 35-41)

On that day, when evening had come, [Jesus said to the disciples,] “Let us go across to the other side.” And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But 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?” He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

The Gospel of our Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Jesus stills a storm. Oh, we so get this story. We understand storms and chaos. Especially these days with everything in flux, and “what’s going to happen next?” And you really want some calm, and some peace, and to be still. We’re Minnesotans. We know what it’s like to look over a glassy lake with the moon shining down on it, and just feel ahhh! – peace, still. Oh, we get this story. We want this story – the calm, the peace.

But remember that the story doesn’t end with the stillness. It ends with Jesus asking a question, which, at first, sounds like the most ridiculous question in all of scripture. “Why are you afraid?” Note the present tense. Not why were you afraid? But why are you afraid? And so that got me thinking about being afraid, and what these disciples might have been afraid of. And I wondered this, I wondered this: Which is the most frightening, the unknown, the physical danger, or following Jesus? Which is more fearful, the unknown, physical danger, or following Jesus?

The story begins on the shores of Capernaum. It’s where Peter, James, and John live, and it is where Jesus lived as well. It’s home. Jesus has been preaching in Capernaum and he’s getting popular. The crowds are getting bigger. He was preaching in a house for a while, but the crowds got so big he moved to the shore. But then the crowds got so big that he moved now into a boat, to keep from being trampled or to get a little personal space.

He's standing in the boat preaching, and it gets to be evening, and everybody heads home for dinner or for sleep, or to watch their favorite sitcom. And Jesus says, "Let's go across to the other side." The disciples had to be like, "No. Do you know what's on the other side?" Foreigners. Gentiles. It's strange. It's scary. Home is safe. We understand home. We know what to expect when we're home.

Has anybody ever traveled outside the U.S. and not been on a tour? I remember one time when my husband and I were in Rome, we weren't on a tour, and I was in this Italian restaurant trying to order, and nobody there spoke English, and we were trying to figure it out with sign language. And I remembered being in Israel probably about ten years ago, and there were teenagers throwing rocks at our van. We come to find out it was because we were driving in a car on the Sabbath, and they were very conservative teenagers. I remember being in Africa and being called *mamma*, and discovering that was a term of respect for older women.

The other side is confusing. It's a place where things you thought were true aren't necessarily true anymore. And the other side isn't always geographic. It feels like our whole nation is on a journey to the other side right now – when staying in our enclaves of sameness doesn't work anymore. We know now that women have been abused and degraded. We know that blacks have been systematically oppressed. We wonder these days about the moral center of our nation. It's confusing to spend time with people who aren't like me, or who disagree with me, who are "other" than me.

At Bible School this week, there was a little guy who was four. And he hadn't been to preschool before, so this was the first time he was away at school. This place, as kind and as caring as it is, was the "other side" for him. On Thursday, he melted down, and he stood in the middle of the East Lounge, and he screamed, "I want my Mommy!" And he was closed in on himself, and he wouldn't let anybody touch him, because it was so ontologically terrifying to be with the "other."

Sometimes I want my Mommy, too. I want the world to go back to what I understand and where the culture isn't shifting under my feet.

But Jesus still says, "Let us go." "Let us go to the other side." The disciples have every right to be afraid. On the other side they'll encounter pig farmers. They will encounter a guy who lives among the tombs and screams at night. They'll get thrown out of a village – because they have become "others."

So I wonder: which is more frightening – the other side, or the storm? It was night when they left. "Really, Jesus, couldn't we just get a good night's sleep and start off early in the morning?" You know that mast lights and running lights have not been invented yet. It's going to be dark out there. And we read, "But soon a fierce storm came up. High waves were breaking into the boat, and it began to fill with water."

Here's what I'm envisioning: twelve men (which is a lot for a twenty-seven foot boat) slipping and sliding on the wet deck. They're trying to get the sails down before they get ripped or pull the boat over. Four of them over there are bailing for all they're worth. At least two are hanging over the rail, because even seasoned sailors get sick in this kind of a storm. And they're all afraid.

We know what that's like. Have you ever been driving at night during a storm? And the rain or the snow is coming so fast that the wipers can't even handle it, and the road is dark and it's curving, and you've got white knuckles on the steering wheel? Have you ever had a doctor say to you, "Something's not right? We need you need to come in for some more tests." And now you're sitting there as they draw blood, or hook you up to beeping machine, and you wonder, "Is this going to change my whole life?"

We hear about the refugees, forced to leave their homes because of gangs or because of war. And they have nowhere to go, and nobody wants them, and they're on a boat or in a van, and they're desperate. We've heard about people in the face of storms, tornados, hurricanes, hiding from the wind and debris. Praying it will stop. We know about that fear.

But which is more frightening, the going to the other side, or the storm in-between? Is it what you know that's shifting under your feet, or the floor actually shifting under your feet? Or is it the calm?

The disciples are working hard to survive. They are wet, and bruised, and hurting, and cold, and sick, and scared. And they run to Jesus angry, and they say, "Teacher, don't you care that we're dying?" Which is another great question, by the way. What are they hoping Jesus will do? I kind of think they wanted him to get up and bail.

But Jesus gets up and exceeds expectations. Orders the wind and waves, in no uncertain terms, "Be calm. Be still." And they are. Which is more frightening, the other side, the storm, or that calm? Again, I imagine twelve guys, dripping wet, shaking, with their mouths open.

Now, you can write this whole thing off because it's a miracle, and miracles are problematic. We know from our experiences that lakes don't calm instantly at the flip of a switch. Waves don't just stop.

And we can ask why this storm and not another storm? Why are there storms at all? Why doesn't God save everyone? Why doesn't God save everyone? And why is there evil in the world? You can go way down that rabbit hole. Or you can remember that scripture is not science. Scripture is theology. So the real question is: What is Mark trying to tell us about God here? What does the stilling of the storm tell us about God?

Perhaps there is more to this life than we know and understand. Perhaps life is mysterious and holy. There is one among us even now who we don't understand and we can't control, but who has the power of life and death. Perhaps Mark is calling us to see the world in a different way, to see that we are in the care of a loving God, who really does care that we're dying here; who will not let anything stand between us and God – even the storms, even death itself. Even if the boat goes down, Jesus goes with them.

Notice that Jesus doesn't ask his question until after the calm. "Why are you afraid?" There is so much to be afraid of in this world. So much fear and anger toward "the other." So much, "What if?" So much closing in on ourselves, afraid. So much loss, disappointment, fear.

Jesus' question is still relevant for us now. "Why are you so afraid? Have you no faith?" And recognize that the word most often translated faith (pistos) means faithfulness, confidence, trust. Why are you so afraid? Don't you trust me?" Jesus said.

So perhaps the best question for us this morning is not "What do we fear?" But, "Who do we trust?" When we're faced with stepping out into the other side, asked to learn, accept, work with the other, who do we trust? When we're faced with real danger for ourselves or others, who do we trust? When we face the infinite, the mysterious, the uncontrollable, who do we trust? Can we stake our lives on Jesus Christ? Or can we at least begin to know Christ well enough to trust a little?

With that in mind, I would like to end with a well-known prayer. Let us pray.

*"O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us trust to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord."*¹

And let the people say "Amen."

RESPONSE: Amen!

¹ Evangelical Lutheran Worship, "Evening Prayer," (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2006) p.317