

Sermon by Elisa Owen
Crescent Hill Presbyterian
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Calming the Storm Mark 4: 35-41

Our word from God this morning begins with the phrase, “On that day, when evening had come, Jesus said to them, ‘Let us go and cross to the other side.’” When I read that, one question and one recollection presented themselves to me. The question that presented itself to me was, “the other side of what?” To where does Jesus propose we go with him? That is an important question given the fact that we, as I speak, are engaged in discerning together who God is calling our church to be into the future.

The recollection which presented itself to me was a simple reminder that this Biblical text, like all others do by the power of the Holy Spirit, tells a story about this very day, the one we are living. This is true even when, on the surface, a text appears to talk about “crossing to the other side” on “that” day long ago, rather than on this one. I know that to be true because I know God uses Holy Scripture to speak into our lives right here and right now. I have experienced God using the scripture to speak into my life enough times to have no trouble stating that to you as fact.

Now, if we were to read back in the gospel of Mark, we would learn that when he first spoke the words we hear this morning, Jesus was “teaching beside the sea.”¹[\[1\]](#) On the day long ago, granted, the sea by which he was teaching was most certainly the Sea of Galilee. We know that because we can trace Jesus’ journey through Mark’s gospel to know that he had arrived by Chapter 4 to Capernaum, which was situated on the northwest shore of the very large lake known to us as the Sea of Galilee. But none of us are sitting by the Sea of Galilee this morning. Instead, we are sitting in God’s presence on the banks of the Ohio River. That does not, however, as I have stated, mean that our Lord is not speaking directly to us through this text. I am, on the contrary, quite convinced that he most certainly is.

Let’s briefly consider the numerous seashores on which I know we are sitting. Well, collectively, we are looking to get to the other side of the mysterious sea that is our transition process. We are anxious to learn what God has in store for Crescent Hill Presbyterian Church, and know that getting to the other side of that sea will require many subtle navigational skills that we are learning as we go. Many of us, individually, are listening to Jesus from the shores of grief; grief over the loss of a loved one, whether that be a spouse, parent or dear friend; or even the loss of a life giving dream. The beach from which some of us are listening to Jesus is the one that opens onto a treacherous ocean called “economic distress” or “failing health.” Others of us will be getting into the boat with Jesus from the shore called “destructive habits”, “debilitating disappointment with the state of the nation” or “damaging despair over the future of our high court.”

So you see, we may not be sitting beside the Sea of Galilee, but that does not mean that every last one of us are not being invited to leave the beaches on which we are standing. That does not mean that he is not asking us to brave a crossing with him today that will take us to the other side of the sea that might even now be separating us from his loving presence. On what shore are you seated? Can you name the sea he’d have you cross over in order that he might stay close to you? From where are you being invited into

his boat? If you were to leave that place, choose to get in the boat with him, what would you have to give up? What might you gain?

Well, our story says that, on that day, long ago, the disciples chose to step into the boat with Jesus. They chose to have faith that he would travel with them all the way to the other side. They chose to accept his invitation to journey with them, believing that to be with him was worth leaving the comfort of familiar shores. Now notice, here, that I did not say the “safety” of familiar shores. That’s because all the familiar shores we find ourselves on are not necessarily safe, though they may be relatively comfortable. A battered woman is not safe on the familiar shore of her own home. She is only very aware of exactly where the danger lies. This may offer her some advantage in trying to avoid it, but does not assure her ultimate salvation from that danger. The same is true for the shores on which we sit.

Many of us are acutely aware of that. We, like the disciples on that day long ago, have accepted the invitation to get into Jesus’ boat. We have experienced some of the gifts of being in God’s presence and so are willing to take a risk to move to a new place with Jesus. We have stepped in his boat thinking that if anyone can help us navigate the stormy seas that separate us from him, he can. We’ve trusted him that far. We’ve gotten up hopefully from our spots on the sand and readied ourselves for the journey with him to the other side, whatever that may mean for you or for me at any given moment; maybe the land free of addiction, the land free of depression, the land free of fear, the land free of grief, the land free of anger. There are, as you can see, many compelling destinations to which he might lead us.

But, the problem comes when the storms start rolling in; when our way is impeded by high wind and rain. Because, as soon as the storms come, whether their rage is about sickness, hurt, anger or doubt, we, like the disciples who first travelled with Jesus on “that” day long ago, start to get anxious that Jesus might not be as good at leading us as we first thought. Fear, anxiety, is always the first responder to storms that blow up as we are crossing over to the other side of life’s seas in our vulnerable little boats. This is the case even when God is the one who has invited us on board the boats in which we are travelling. The fight or flight response of the reptilian brain, the brain from which our own brains have evolved, is deeply embedded in our psyches. When we sense danger, that part of our brain is more than willing to take over. The question is does our faith suggest that it is helpful to let the reptilian part of our brain hold sway when fear’s storms roll into our crossings?

Our story this morning lets us know exactly what the disciples did when the storm rolled in as they journeyed toward the other side of the Sea of Galilee with Jesus. They responded to the waves beating into their little boat, to their fear that it might be swamped, by suspecting the intentions of the one who had invited them to leave the comfortable, if not necessarily safe, shore. I am fascinated by the fact that the disciples perceive Jesus’ sleeping in the stern of the boat not as reassurance that the boat is going to be OK, but as evidence of his neglect of them. They assume, because he is relaxed enough to sleep in the midst of the chaos, because he is not rushing around madly, choosing panic as his response to the storm assailing the boat they are all in together, that he does not care about them. That is quite obvious from their question of him, “Teacher, don’t you care that we are perishing?”

How many times have you found yourself in the middle of one of life’s storms and asked that same question of him? Yes, well, I thought Lord, that you called me here. To this place, to this life, to this spouse, this child, this job, or situation; I thought you had invited me into your boat. But then, as soon as the going got rough, I began to suspect that you might be planning to jump to one of the other boats who are travelling along with us on this journey. I began to suspect that it was your plan to abandon me and mine as the whole lot of us set off to the other side of this stormy sea.

So was it? Let's back up as we ask that. One of the great metaphors we use to understand God's care of us is that of a parent. Don't parents do a lot of teaching of their children? For example, have you ever seen a mother or father try and teach a child to throw a ball? How is that most often done? The Father models the action of throwing the ball and then asks his child to imitate his actions. The parent takes a ball, and then in slow motion, shows a child how she must turn sideways, step out with one foot, bring the hand up above the ear, and then launch the ball at the height of the arm's trajectory with a flick of the wrist. Or, a parent might play cops and robbers, or soldiers with sons and daughters. Ever done that? As we make the noise of bombs exploding around them as they run, as he ducks and weaves his big body through the imaginary battlefield, the child runs behind him, screaming joyfully, doing the same thing. My friends, I believe that Jesus was doing the same sort of teaching in that boat.

Because I believe there is another way to see the peace of Jesus in the midst of the terrible storm that came upon him and his disciples. A way that does not suggest that Jesus is the one who failed the disciples as they stumbled around their small boat drunk with fear. Could it be that Jesus was trying to tell them that acting out of their fear, running around like chickens with their heads cut off in a small boat, was much more likely to tip it than the wind was anyway? Could it be that he was modeling for them, as a parent does when we are teaching children, modeling for them as he rested in the stern of the boat during the horrible storm the gift of peace that he would give to all who trust in him? After all, Jesus was on intimate terms with the Creator of the storm. He, therefore, had faith enough to know that the storm was not what was putting he and the disciples in the most danger – rather, it was their anxiety about the storm, their panic, that put the boat in the most immediate danger of being tipped.

So, could it be that Jesus' peace in the midst of the storm was not the result of his lack of concern for his followers, but, instead, was the gift he most wanted to give them? Could it be that Jesus' nap was not meant to be interpreted by his followers as evidence that they had a disinterested leader? That his tranquility in the midst of trouble was not evidence they had a captain worthy only of their mutiny, but, instead, that his tranquility was, itself, the place to which he was trying to lead them? That living in the peace that is the fruit of the gift of our faith in Him was "the other side?"

If this were the case, what would it change about the way we react to the storms in our own lives, in our church, in our town and our nation? What would change about our own knee jerk tendency to fear if we listened to Jesus say to us through the scripture, "peace, be still" and realized that Jesus was speaking as much to the storms that rage within us, as he was to those who rage without? What would change if we were to realize that even the winds and waves that buffet us from the inside, as well as those that buffet us from without, are subject to his Lordship? I have a hunch we'd spend a lot less time being anxious for our lives, and a lot more time praising this One who is revealed to us in scripture this very day. The One who even the winds and the waves, all of those that assail our tiny boats, whether they assail us from within our without, obey.

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

Elisa Owen
Crescent Hill Presbyterian Church
Louisville, KY
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