

Year B Proper 12 Mark 4, 35 to 41 We Have Storms to Calm

On a first read, this Gospel story looks like a demonstration of Jesus' astonishing power — and so it is. Jesus and his disciples are traveling across the Sea of Galilee. When a violent storm threatens to destroy the boat and everyone in it, Jesus somehow manages to remain asleep. The disciples' desperate wake-up call — “Teacher, doesn't it matter to you that we are perishing?” — hardly commends either their faith or Jesus' behavior. Jesus, however, awakens with authority, rebukes the wind and commands the sea by saying, “Silence! Be still!” So when the wind ceases and a “great calm” stills the sea, no wonder the disciples ponder Jesus' authority. “Who is this guy?” they ask. Who indeed?

Modern readers often struggle with miracle stories like this. Some people dismiss the bible's miracles as pure make believe, others try to explain them with science. Even for those of us with faith, “nature miracles” like stilling the storm challenge the boundaries of our imaginations.

Preachers and hymn composers and biblical scholars alike try to ease our discomfort by personalizing the storm. “When the storms of life surround you, and the waves are breaking in upon you,” they say, “just remember that Jesus is Lord of the storm!” So we avoid our uneasiness with nature miracles by turning them into allegories – made up stories that mean something else. In this case, a made up story that represents the things that test our souls. “Jesus, Savior, pilot me / over life's tempestuous sea,” pleads one hymn.

But that is not what Mark is getting at. This is a real storm with real waves and real people in danger of being swamped in their boat. Mark is after something

greater than an allegory. Careful Bible readers have long noticed how Mark's account echoes some of Israel's Psalms. Facing a storm on the sea, sailors "cried out to the LORD in their trouble." Then the LORD made the storm "be still," "and the waves of the sea were hushed" (Psalm 107:28-29, NRSV). Just as Israel's God stills the storm and hushes the waves, so does Mark's Jesus.

Mark does something remarkable. Mark presents Jesus as Lord of the storm, just as Israel's God commands storms. Mark's Jesus carries God's authority with him. Mark earlier writes that Jesus has the power to forgive sins (2:1-12), and that Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath (2:23-28). So, when the disciples ask, "Who is this guy?" the readers of Mark's gospel already know the answer. This guy is God. When you are in Jesus' presence, you are in the very presence of God. This was earth shattering news back then and it is our key to understanding what this story is saying to us now, today.

Jesus is God. Hang on to that fact as we explore this story more fully.

We may be tempted to stop at the nice, "The moral of the story is..." sort of interpretation...Jesus calms the storm after the disciples call on him. Therefore, we can count on Jesus to come to our rescue, to calm the storms of our lives, right? Wrong. Sure, we rely on Jesus – we believe that Jesus died for us when we did not deserve that extreme sacrifice and we give our lives over to God – but that is only scratching the surface of this story.

The storm is raging, the disciples are panicking, and Jesus is sound asleep. That seems odd, doesn't it?

When they do manage to wake him up and he stills the storm, he doesn't say, "Whew, good thing you woke me up" or "That was close – why didn't you wake me sooner?" No...He tells them off...He chastises them for waking him...He says, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

Now, some people say this storm was stirred up by demons trying to prevent Jesus from bringing the Good News to the other side of the lake but, whether you think it was demons or simply a natural storm, Jesus lies sleeping for a very good reason. It is the same reason my mum taught me how to use a washing machine before sending me off to university. It is the same reason I stood facing off with my oldest son in the kitchen one day many years ago now, hands on my hips saying, "You decide how long to heat your soup in the microwave." He was stubbornly refusing to enter a time and start the microwave because he wasn't sure he'd do it right. And I said to him, "I won't always be around to do this for you – you need to learn to do it for yourself."

Remember I said to hang on to the fact that Jesus was God – the Word made flesh? Here is where that becomes important. Just a little before this hazardous boat ride, Jesus chose the 12 disciples and "gave them the authority to cast out demons." Jesus, our God made flesh, passed on his authority to his disciples. Fast forward a little bit in the story to the feeding of the 5000...the disciples say to Jesus, "this crowd is hungry – better send them away so that they can buy food in the villages" and Jesus says, "No, you feed them." The disciples are floored. Suddenly produce enough food for 5000 people? Cast out demons? Calm a storm?

I won't always be around to do this for you – Jesus says – you need to learn to do this for yourself. Jesus stays sleeping in the boat while the storm rages around them because Jesus knows the disciples are capable of dealing with it on their own. The problem is...the disciples don't have enough faith in themselves. "Why are you afraid?" Jesus says to them. "Do you still have no faith?"

The disciples, given authority by the Son of God to cast out demons, cannot or will not rebuke the wind and the waves of the demonic sea. Did you notice they don't even try? They are too busy panicking to calm the storm. "Jesus is in the back of the boat," they reason. "He'll save us."

It is not the last time they fall short in this way. When Jesus descends from the mountain after he has been transfigured in glory, he meets a distraught father whose son is possessed. The commissioned disciples cannot cast out the demon, so Jesus, again, laments their lack of faith and rebukes the demon.

The disciples know Jesus can cast out demons. They have faith in him. They've seen it time and time again. They just don't know they can, or they aren't willing to.

You disciples of little faith, you believe in Jesus enough to leave everything behind and follow him. You trust Jesus with your lives, you trust in his words, and you trust in his power, but you don't trust in his power in **you**.

Jesus calls the disciples to follow him, which means he believes they have what it takes to be like him. He gives them power to proclaim the good news, to cast out demons, and to heal every kind of disease and sickness. But, they are still afraid.

Like those first disciples so long ago, we too have been called by Jesus. We have been led by the Spirit to gather as his body, the Church. Why do we doubt? We believe in Jesus enough to worship him. We trust him with our lives, we trust in his words and his power to bring life and to cast out sin and death, but we often do not trust in his power in us. We say the words at the end of every Eucharist..."Glory to God, whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine." But do we trust it?

We of little faith, why are we so afraid?

I often meet up with panic and worry about the decline and death of the church. We are terrified the church isn't going to survive the storm. We look around for Jesus and wonder if the church is going to die while he's napping. Doesn't he know that membership is down? Doesn't he know the budget is broken? Doesn't he know we're taking on water?

Yes. Jesus does know. He knows our prisons are too full and children's stomachs are too empty. He knows we craft laws that protect our right to discriminate while there aren't enough laws to protect abused women and children and minority groups. He knows exactly the toll of the storm.

The kicker is that Jesus doesn't call his disciples to merely follow. He knows the world is broken and his answer was to form the church – his body bearing his kingdom to the world. He calls us to lead, to heal, to proclaim, and to cast out. We think that because we have Jesus with us in the boat, we can just tap him on the shoulder and call him into action every time we need him. He asks us to have faith in the power he promises and faith in the work he commissions us to do for the Kingdom of God. God's power is always at work – tirelessly drawing all things

to the fulfillment of his purpose which is to reconcile the whole world to each other and to him through Christ's saving death on the cross and the gift of the Holy Spirit dwelling among us and in us.

Through this amazing gift, we are called to work to fulfill God's purpose. Christ calls and commissions the church to be exorcists of the demons and healers of the sicknesses that plague our communities. Is there discrimination? Cast it out. Is there division? Heal it. Are there painful words? Rebuke them. Are there broken hearts? Bind them. Are there storms that would keep us from proclaiming that nothing can separate us from the love of God? Silence them.

There's a comic strip called *B.C.* that chronicles the humorous everyday lives of two cavemen. A few years ago, there was a strip in which two cavemen are sitting together under the night sky, when one says, "Sometimes I want to ask God why God lets so many bad things happen in the world."

The other asks, "Why don't you?"

"Because I'm afraid God would ask me the same question."

"Why are you afraid?" Jesus asks. "Have you still no faith?" We have storms to calm.