

Mark 4: 35-41 "In the Middle of the Sea" Rev. Janet Chapman 6/23/24

There is a lake outside Fresno on which my daughters and I rented a rowboat, and although I am very inexperienced, I thought how hard could it be? I found it surprisingly easy to get halfway across the lake in no time. I thought, "What's the big deal – this rowing thing is a breeze!" (pun intended). Then the winds began to pick up and clouds gathered. On the horizon, a storm was brewing. Come to find out, the wind had been at our backs when we started out, but now we were facing a strong headwind and rowing had grown much more difficult. Twenty minutes went by and the only thing my continuous strokes were doing were keeping us from moving even farther from shore. Both daughters took turns helping with the other set of oars but it was no use. Ivy even jumped in the water and tried to push the boat but if you have met my youngest, you can imagine how successful that was. I tried not to show my concern, saying "I bet we could win the world record for rowing the longest without going anywhere." My daughters didn't think I was funny and began to whimper in fear. It wasn't until we stopped trying to row directly into the wind and started moving diagonally that we, inch by inch, made progress. But this was now 2 hours later and we had to be back in 30 minutes. I tried flagging down the dock attendant hoping they might send a motorboat out to pull us in. I began to ponder excuses for our tardiness, finally deciding the best idea was the truth – I just wasn't strong enough to fight the current but seriously, didn't they care that we were struggling out there? They could have sent out help so we could have returned faster. Come to find out, they only do that if you capsize. I'll remember next time I'm stranded.

Our adventure pales in comparison to what happened in our scripture but it does invite us into some of the drama. The truth is, it's hard to swallow the full gravity of the fishermen's situation. We read this story and might remember Sunday School flannel boards that showed a sleeping Jesus on the stern of a boat, with white capped waves all around, but we know Jesus will wake up, raise his arms, command the waves to cease, the sun will come out, and all will be well, safe and comfortable. David Fler says that's where we go wrong – we read Mark as if we are on the outside looking in, as if we are miles away from the action, rather than the way the author intended it. Instead, imagine Mark as our tour guide leading

us down into the depth of the storm, putting us on that boat right next to the fishermen and then see how the story changes. Mark wants us to imagine ourselves right in the middle of the sea, as he mentions three separate times that Jesus is on the sea in just one verse. For landlubbers, the literal translation of the Greek is pretty dramatic: “He got into the boat and sat on the sea.” That’s not bad Greek phrasing, it’s meant to sound exactly how it feels when we step into the boat. The boat is 26 by 8 feet, and four feet deep, possibly fitting a dozen passengers. It isn’t a Norwegian cruise ship; it is a large-sized rowboat raised at one end with very little between you and the sea floor. Like I learned to do in a small kayak, you step into this boat, one foot secure on land and the other touching the craft’s unsteady floor, as it moves back and forth with the water. Then both feet are in and you use your arms to steady yourself, holding on to the side and smelling the wet cedar and fish. You listen to the water lapping against the sides, all innocent enough... until you launch off.

By the time our story really gets going, we are in the middle of the sea. The wind is picking up, the sea is getting choppy, stomachs are getting queasy, the sky is growing dark with dark cumulous clouds moving in. The wind howls, the waves swell, the air is damp, and you hold on for dear life. The boat rises and falls, jarring your teeth when you hit. Lightning flashes, thunder crashes, your ears ring from the sheer volume. You start talking to yourself, “Be calm, breath in and out slowly, don’t hyperventilate.” “Oh God,” you whisper, “help us.” The boat lists to your right and you feel it about to capsize; waves crest and break over the deck; the boat is taking on water; you feel it sloshing around your calves. Andrew and James are bailing water. Sea-worthy fishermen are wide-eyed and afraid. They’re yelling directions at each other, but the wind screams louder. The boat creaks and groans and then a loud cracking sound breaks forth – is this it? Will we break apart? Is this the end? And at the back of all this chaos is Jesus...asleep. Asleep on a cushion. The story sounds different when we sit inside the boat in the middle of the sea, than we are hearing it from several miles away. Suddenly, we realize this is our life, this is where we live, we are in the boat and a storm is boiling. Life, as the biblical tradition makes clear, is both chaos and order, loss and renewal, death and resurrection. It is a continuous collision of opposites and trying to reconcile the contradictions. This is our life.

I wonder where your rowboat has led you? A child diagnosed with a serious illness? A cheating spouse? A back-stabbing workplace? Hostilities that invade home and splinter relationships? Bills that devour limited incomes and make basic need go unmet? Addictions that suck the air out of existence? We prefer to sail along on those smooth seas filled with always-applicable rules and patterns that allow us to predict and control things. Whereas this might appear good for science, it is lousy for faith, because the reality is our boats are perpetually tossed around by an interplay of forces: good and evil, rational and nonrational, nature and nurture, conscious and unconscious. Therefore, our initial response is, "God I am drowning – don't you care? Our world is collapsing – where are you?" Jesus awakens and says to the sea, "Quiet, hush!" And the wind whimpers, like a frightened animal, and stills. Because of God, Jesus isn't overpowered by evil or nature but instead works within it to bring hope. Then comes the most remarkable response. The disciples are now even more afraid. After the danger disappears, they are still scared, but why? Because they have heard told of the deeds of the Lord, their Bible speaks in Psalm 107, "[the Lord} made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed." Who is this in their boat that the wind and the sea obey him? The answer for anyone familiar with Hebrew scriptures is this is the Lord God Almighty, Yahweh who created the heavens and the earth. God is in our boat. When we grow afraid of the storm, the deep water, of drowning; when we fear the marriage will crumble, the pain will never stop, the church won't survive, we forget that God is in the boat with us. Or maybe worse, we d remember, because if God really is in our boat, then we can't keep God at arm's length. It becomes much harder to try and manipulate God to our own agenda because God sees us up close and personal, knows our deepest hungers and needs. We can't get away with complaining "You don't understand!" We may even have to surrender to God's activity in God's own timing.

You and I have seen our share of storms, slow-developing storms that took years to brew and from such storms, stories arise about those who have held on when all seemed lost. There is a soldier blinded by a head wound who later credits his affliction for forcing him to develop other senses and "see" what few others can see. Someone here reinterprets the abuse suffered long ago and claims, "I now have a higher calling; I want to use what I've

learned to help others.” Several years after a painful divorce, another says she would never have developed confidence in her own abilities if she’d remained in that marriage. Tragedies, misfortunes, storms brewing, but instead of crumbling or quitting, some have found meaning in what happened in the past.

Stephen Crane, author of The Red Badge of Courage, adds that sometimes we live out events in our imagination *before* we even experience them. Contrary to expectations that a writer’s work is based on past experiences, Crane writes about events before he experiences them, making his fictional work eerily predictive of what lies ahead. His only experience with battle came years after he published the novel, The Red Badge of Courage. Crane wrote Maggie, a novel about a prostitute, long before he fell in love with a real-life madam. Life imitating art? Or is it that Crane seemed to be living his life backwards, experiencing the future before it happened? Although we aren’t novelists, like Crane, life for us is imagined before we live it. This is our view of scripture. Today we have rehearsed a story that is waiting to happen to you and me. Sometime in the future, we will step into a small boat and be pushed into the middle of the sea. A storm will appear and we will be afraid. In the midst of that fear, God will ask us to have faith, faith that God is in our boat and working to bring hope. There is a scene near the end of John Bunyan’s classic allegorical novel, The Pilgrim’s Progress, that finds the chief character Christian, the archetype of a person trying to lead a life of faith, nearing the end of his symbolic journey. The journey requires him to cross a great and fearsome river. He is afraid but together with his friend, named Hopeful, they waded into the waters with trepidation. Christian cries out, “I sink in deep Waters, the Billows go over my head, all His waves go over me.” Hopeful replies with what may be among the most graceful words in all of literature, “Be of good cheer, my friend, I feel the bottom, and it is good...” Faith is a difficult thing when we are in deep waters but Mark has given us story after story to help us articulate our fears and faith. Later in chapter 6, Jesus appears again on the sea, and with the winds howling and us straining at the oars, he says, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” That’s who Jesus is.