

June 24
Whitsuntide V
St Mark 4:35 - 41

The Sea of Galilee is really just a good size fresh water inland lake. Even at the widest part, you can stand on one beach or dune and look across to the other side. It's tiny compared to the inland seas we call the Great Lakes, and there are undoubtedly lakes in Michigan that are bigger than the one in northern Israel. What makes it particularly dangerous is that all day long air blows in from the Mediterranean Sea, heats as it crosses the land, and the pressure builds up along the high cliff walls of the Golan Heights. Then, at sunset when the temperatures cool, it sweeps back out again. That makes for some dangerous waves, especially in the pitch-black nights, and all the more so if it is accompanied by a violent thunderstorm.

People rarely risked crossing the water in the night, and the disciples, some of who had been commercial fishermen, had a healthy respect for the water and wind. Jesus was not a fisherman, but he lived in the immediate area, and he would have known about the great danger of going across the water at night.

Despite the dangers, that night He invites the disciples to get into the boat and to set off for the opposite shoreline. St Mark doesn't tell us why it was so important to cross just then, when a few hours later, after dawn, it would have been far safer. On the whole, it doesn't make good sense, unless Jesus did it to teach an important lesson to his disciples. And then, by extension, to us.

Even so, it is recorded in His gospel and, for the most part, it seems to be an historical vignette that has rarely little importance in our lives. But like the very deep Sea of Galilee, the answers are sometimes best found just beneath the surface.

You and I will not be setting out in a relatively small fishing boat late at night across the Sea of Galilee or the Jordan River that spills out from it and flows down to the Dead Sea. And when we look at a map, this small region of Israel is more than just water. It was a dividing line, and to a great extent, remains that way. To the north it was the division between Syria, Lebanon, and Israel. When the Sea of Galilee empties into the Jordan River on one side of the divide is Israel; on the other, the Kingdom of Jordan. When I was there 18 years ago, there were barbed wire fences between the two nations. Earlier this year when Bishop Houglund led a pilgrimage there, the barbed wire demarcation line had been augmented by coils of concertina wire and armed guards at some points, border patrols at others. At one spot where, according to tradition, a line of heavily armed Israeli soldiers stand watch at a line of heavily armed Jordanian soldiers on the other side.

Crossing the Sea of Galilee when conditions were threatening becomes symbolic in many ways for us. It is crossing from safe territory into something that might be very frightening, perhaps even dangerous. We each have our own, usually fairly secretive list, of things which we find frightening. For one person it might be flying in an airplane, for another, speaking in public. It can be almost anything, and the list is endless. Even if it is an irrational phobia to others, for the individual, it is a very real and present danger. Making fun of someone's fear is never the right thing to do. Many years ago an individual who had to confront challenges said firmly, "I do not believe God brought me this far just to drop me off." The situations were still frightening, but I am quite certain in the back of that person's mind was the image of Jesus in the back of the boat, travelling along through the dangers.

You and I encounter many frightening moments in our life, and sometimes find ourselves pushed and pulled right out of where we are comfortable. Sometimes they are very small. We come to church on a Sunday morning and someone is sitting in our pew, and we have to sit somewhere else, near other people and we have to sit in a different spot. Sometimes, it is a diagnosis from a physician, a relationship, age, finances, or the loss of a friend or partner in life. In all of these moments of discomfort to abject fear, Jesus is there with us.

For a moment, let's move beyond the personal. As a parish, a diocese, within the World Wide Anglican Communion, and within Christianity as a whole, we often move into the uncertain and the unknown, and it is sometimes just plain spooky. As I pointed out a couple of weeks ago, we can accept or at least tolerate changes in ourselves, our families, schools, and communities, but we want the church to be the way it always has been in the past. All of us have a golden age from our own past, and that's where we want to keep the church.

Yet every single change in the world around us has had an impact on the church, and on our response in faith to the message of Christ. Every technological and social change feels threatening, and there are people who are convinced that the change will swamp their boat. Often, what is more frightening than anything else is the uncertainty of what is happening. And the easiest thing to do is responded in fear with a very loud "no" If you do this, if we do this, then I quit. I'll walk out.

Those are words of fear. I am afraid of change. I am afraid of anything different from what I already know. It is emphasized in the worst of all the old American gospel songs - Give Me that Old Time Religion - it was good enough for Paul and Silas, it's good enough for me."

Historically, that was the message of the Great Awakening that started about 1740 and died out a decade later because it had little to offer other than looking at the past or at one's own spirituality. When the Second Great Awakening began about 1790, Christians looked at current conditions, looked to the future, and began taking action - action today we pull together under the umbrella of social justice. It was a combination of Christian education and study that teamed up with work.

A lot of people objected - you shouldn't do that. You can't do that! You must stop! And those participating in this adventure of practical practicing Christianity said, "That'll be the day."

Perhaps this is what people experienced earlier this year when they objected to school shootings and gun violence, when they spoke out about social injustice and the absolute necessity of speaking truth to power. Perhaps this is what led the citizens movement to reunited families at border crossings. On the one hand, people who said you shouldn't be doing that. On the other people who said we will not be silenced in the face of something we know with all our heart is evil and inhumane.

The Second Great Awakening came to an end in April 1917 when America entered the great European War. It is coming out of hibernation, and the singers of that old gospel hymn are objecting and saying, you must stop doing that! You aren't following the Bible, you are disrupting things. You must stop. And our answer is once again, "That'll be the day." That is because Christianity is more than personal piety.

When we are anxious and afraid, we don't want to contemplate the unknown, much less risk anything we pull back and retreat into the relative safety but often wickedness of the past.

I think we know it is not always social action when we need the reassurance that Jesus is in the boat crossing a dangerous and stormy divide. It happens on a personal level, and here is where we have an opportunity to be mutually supportive. As a friend describes it, it is an opportunity to be Jesus to someone else.

We are told that every day approximately 22 people take their own life. My belief is that it is a higher number than that. We hear about only a few of them, and only if they are a well known person. I think it begins when we give up on our dreams, or when others savage our dreams as worthless and rubbish. After that it is hard to find an answer to the "Why" questions of life. Any person who has lost the ability or will to answer the question 'why' is already standing on the edge of that murky abyss of the Big Empty.

Why am I here? Why am I taking up space? Why is there any reason to hope tomorrow might be better. When we lose the ability to answer it the pain is horrendous.

As I said last week, Jesus is inviting us to become better persons because he knows we are absolutely capable of being better today than we were yesterday. Jesus extends the positive invitation, and in His perfect love, there is no fear of the unknown, crossing divisions, and barriers that provide the answers to the why question of the soul, and gives life.

Jesus is there in the boat on the proverbial dark and stormy night, with us. That's when two wonderful things happen. The first is the spiritual presence of our Lord renews our courage and we find meaning, and start knowing without any hesitation, the answers to the "why".

So the first wonderful thing is that when we realize the presence of Jesus, we start finding positive answers to truly hard why questions in our life.

The second is that we are able give deeply of ourselves to the people around us because the most important thing we can do is to persistently invite them to share the journey and adventure with us. Lunch, coffee, going for a walk, coming to an event or to worship here. Anything, anything at all. Cross the divides, take the risks. Take the risks of being turned down, but keep asking. Take the risks of someone saying 'yes'.

My first summer job was doing yard work for a very famous, wealthy, and important man who had been forced by the company's police into retirement. The last years had not been kind to him, and he did a superb job of masking his loneliness and his inability to answer the 'why question.' At least once a day he'd come out to where I was working and we'd talk, and we discovered we shared the same birthday. For an hour or so I flirted with the idea of suggesting maybe he could come to our house for hamburgers on the grill and birthday cake and ice crême, but then dropped the idea. The divide between our lives was far too great and dangerous, so I justified not pitching the question by telling myself he would probably be having dinner with someone else. I was afraid of the results if he had said, 'yes'. Tragically a lot of people must have thought the same thing. The morning he turned 70 and I turned fifteen, he had a one car roll-over accident. Probably, although it was never spoken, he was one of those 22 people who each day take their own life.

He'd lost the answers to Why? I didn't have the courage to cross those dangerous social and economic divides. I can say I was too young, too inexperienced to have attempting to cross that divide between us - age, social standing, and so on. We both lost.

Standing against this loss is Jesus. Have courage; I am with you. And then He is counting on us to be in partnership with him, to be mutually encouraging of others.